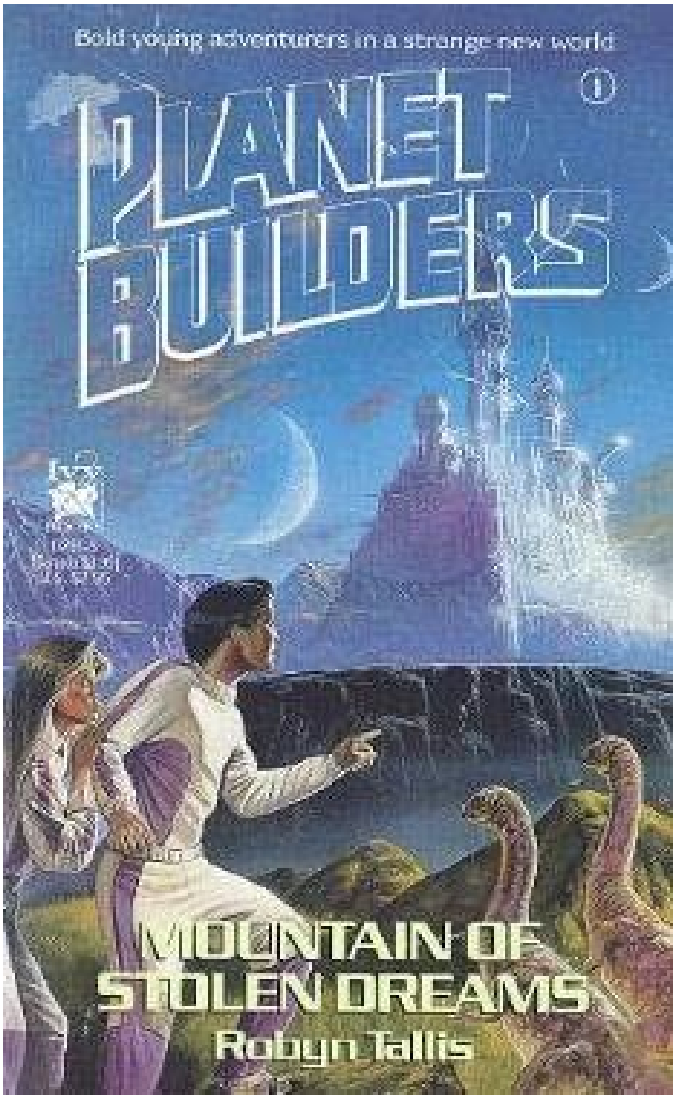

Mountain of Stolen Dreams

The first book in the Planet Builders series

Robyn Tallis

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To the Panama-Texas Connection

With thanks to Bruce Coville, Debra Doyle, Jim Macdonald, and Sherwood Smith who built the planet.

Ivy Books
Published by Ballantine Books
Produced by Butterfield Press, Inc.
133 Fifth Avenue
New York, New York 10003
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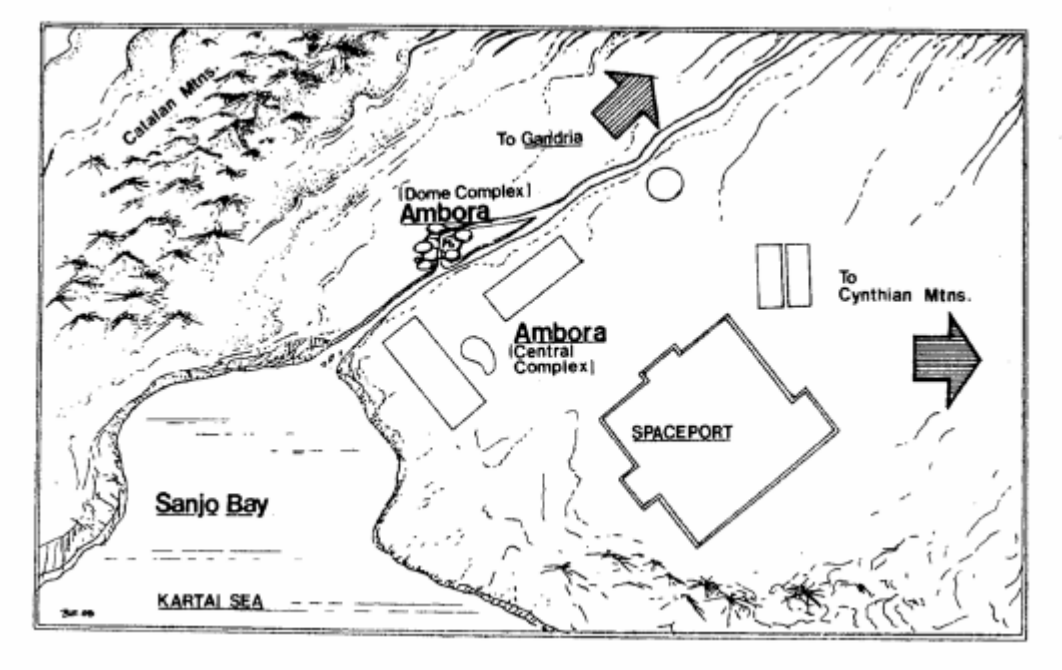
Cover illustration by Bob Eggleton
Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 88-91131
ISBN: 0-8041-0201-5
Manufactured in the United States
First Edition: December 1988



CHAPTER ONE:

Sky Ride

Sean Matthews stood at his father's right-hand side, waiting for the elevator that would carry them into the sky. Because it was morning, and they were facing north, the sixteen-year-old was in the older man's shadow.

Five minutes dragged by. Sean began tapping his foot but stopped when his father turned to glare at him.

The elevator arrived. Governor Matthews stepped in. Sean followed him. Six other people came behind them: the official greeting team that would welcome the newest batch of colonists to arrive on Gauguin.

Once inside the elevator, Sean chose to face the clear wall. Most of the adults, however, chose one of the opaque walls—in order to avoid seeing what was about to happen.

Sean nudged his father and pointed to a trio of

theskies pressed against the fence. The large, lizardlike animals were watching the proceedings carefully, their amber eyes wide with interest. Governor Matthews scowled. When the colonists first arrived the theskies had been terrified; now they were so

friendly they were becoming a nuisance. The fence around the loading dock had been erected specifically to keep the theskies from getting entangled with the elevator mechanisms.

Sean heard the door close behind him. By craning his neck and squinting, he could just see the absurdly slender cables that would guide and support the elevator on its trip. Though he couldn't see them more than an arm's length past the elevator, Sean knew the cables stretched thousands of meters into the sky to a satellite locked in an orbit precisely matching Gauguin's daily rotation. Even though the satellite traveled over a thousand kilometers per hour, it always remained directly over the loading dock.

Technically, this was a "geosynchronous satellite." But Spacers referred to them as "flyspecks," because from space they looked like flyspecks on a globe.

The elevator began to move. Looking out, Sean fixed his eyes on the ground. Soon the surface of the planet was several meters below him and receding fast. His stomach began to flutter. He glanced over his shoulder. Only one of the adults had turned to look through the clear wall. The man's jaw was set, but his face seemed to

have gone pale under skin that was usually the typical amber-honey color to which the human race had blended itself over the last five hundred years. The man nodded at Sean, then shifted to face the blank wall.

Sean looked straight out into the sky and fought back a wave of dizziness. He began to review the way the elevator worked, a trick he used to help himself through this part of the ride. He envisioned the four slender but enormously strong cables linking the satellite to the loading dock, making it possible for an "elevator" to climb into space without the tremendous burst of energy it took for a conventional rocket to escape the pull of the planet's gravity.

He turned and looked at the indicator above the door. Two thousand meters and still climbing. Looking back out over the planet, undoubtedly the most beautiful he had ever seen, Sean fought to keep himself from loving it. He had done that too many times before, on too many worlds. When his family moved to Gauguin, Sean had vowed not to let himself to be hurt that way again.

Who am I? thought the girl. The question scared her. She really ought to know who she was.

Maybe if she could see something it would help. She tried to open her eyes, but they wouldn't work. She tried again. When they still wouldn't open she started to scream, only her mouth wouldn't work, either. Nothing came out.

She tried to move an arm, a hand, a finger. *Anything.* Nothing happened, not a single twitch. It was as if she had been bound with rope from head to foot.

A wave of panic surged through her mind. But before it could overwhelm her, a soft voice began to whisper soothing words in her ear. "Good morning, Clea. Please relax

while you wait for your body and your memory to reactivate. You are safe and well. I repeat, you are safe and well. You will see your family soon. All of you are safe and well."

Clea! That's who I am. Clea Tourni. Her panic began to subside. At least she wasn't dead —or even alone, which at the moment seemed worse.

"You have been asleep for over two months," continued the voice. "Now you are starting to wake. It will take some time, for you have been in a very deep sleep. When you can move, press down with your right hand. Someone will come to help you. Please relax. You are safe and well."

Clea forced her eyes open again, long enough to see a curved sheet of clear blue material. She realized it was the last thing she had seen before falling asleep, and suddenly remembered where she was: on a starship bound for Gauguin, the planet her family had agreed to help colonize.

Oh, hurry! she thought to her body. *Hurry!*

Suddenly her right foot began to tingle. It was sharp, almost painful, and she decided her body could take its time waking up after all. But the process had begun. It felt like the pins and nee-

dies she experienced when she sat on her leg the wrong way. Only this was a thousand times more intense, like a wave of liquid fire rolling up her side, sweet and hot and electric but just too powerful to bear. She tried to scream again, but her mouth still wasn't working.

Hold on, she told herself. *You can make it. They warned you waking up would feel like this.*

Ah. That was good. Her memory was coming back. She let her mind drift back, first to the les* sons she had taken to prepare for the journey through hyperspace, then to the pictures of Gauguin itself: the black sand beaches and glowing seas, the soaring mountains and great jungles had been truly spectacular. As the instructor had said—any planet so beautiful the advance team decided to name it for one of Old Earth's greatest artists couldn't be all bad.

Clea smiled as she remembered the instructor. / *wonder if there'll be anyone that cute on Gauguin.*

Goh-gaan, she reminded herself, determined not to be marked as an outsider by saying the name of the planet incorrectly.

Suddenly her left side began to tingle. More fire rippled through her. She lurched in response, realized that she could move, and pressed down with her right hand.

Seconds later the blue shield rolled back, and she found herself looking up into the greenest eyes she had ever seen.

"Good morning! And welcome to Gauguin—or

more precisely, the space above Gauguin. I hope you slept well."

Clea nodded, thinking it was unfair of them to send a boy who looked like this to wake her from a two-month sleep. She wondered what her breath smelled like.

"Do you want to try standing?" asked the boy. She nodded again, thinking that if this were a fairy tale, he would have had to wake her with a kiss, which might not have been a bad idea. The boy touched a button at the side of her sleeping case, and the edges folded down like the petals of a drooping flower. He held out his hand and helped her to a sitting position. She tried to stand, but the room started to spin, and she fell back onto the bed.

"Whoa!" laughed the boy. "Give yourself a little time. Your body's lost the habit of being vertical. Here, put your head between your knees for a minute."

Clea did as she was told, not caring how undignified she looked in front of this strange, handsome stranger.

Suddenly her stomach rolled over. *No!* she thought desperately. *Don't let me be sick. Not now. Not here.*

With relief she realized that as queasy as she felt, there was nothing for her to throw up. Her stomach was totally empty.

A voice nearby distracted her from her troubles. "Good morning, Mrs. Tourni," said a pleasant-sounding young woman.

Good. Her mother was awake. Clea lifted her head, thought better of it, and put it back between her knees.

"Don't rush yourself," said the boy beside her. "Take a few slow, deep breaths. Then I'll give you some medicine to counter some of the side effects of your long sleep."

Clea nodded and did as the boy said.

"My name is Sean," he continued, as she practiced the deep breathing. "Sean Matthews. I'm part of the welcoming team—mostly because my father is a local big-wig."

She glanced up. He flashed her a dazzling smile.

"Anyway," he continued, "I'm glad you're here. We've spent a lot of time getting ready for new settlers over the last two years. Once the construction program was going full tilt, we had lots of buildings but no one to live in them. Very depressing. It will be good to have them filled with real human beings. Especially pretty ones like you."

The unexpected compliment disrupted Clea's breath pattern. "You're taking advantage of me," she murmured, lifting her head again. Good—the room held still this time, and her stomach didn't do more than flutter a bit.

She examined her "prince" more closely. He was tall and slender, with deep green eyes

and hair as black as space.

A familiar rumbling noise to their right informed Clea that her father was awake. He had been making that sound when he woke for as long as she could remember. "Hullo, Daddy!" she called. "Sleep well?"

"Mmmprhh grzznichh," muttered a gravelly voice.

Sean smiled. "Does he always sound like that?" "That's his happy noise," said Clea. "You don't want to be around on a bad day."

Fifteen minutes later the entire Tourni family was on its feet. With her parents on one side of her and her little sisters, Andrena and Sara, on the other, Clea felt ready to walk to the observation deck to take a look at their new home. To her delight Sean excused the other "awakeners" and offered to stay with the family until they finished getting their bearings. She walked beside him as he led them down a long, curving corridor with smooth blue walls.

Sean glanced sideways at Clea as they walked along the blue corridor. She was about ten centimeters shorter than himself, with honey-brown hair that rippled halfway down her back—about the same color as Zach Yamoto's, but much more attractive on Clea than on that skate. Her eyes held flecks of brown and amber and gold, as if they had been designed to go with her hair. Sean wondered if the Tourni family was into genetic engineering, or if Clea's beauty was just the luck of the draw.

When they reached the observation deck, Sean heard the Tournis make the same involuntary sound—a quick little intake of breath—that he had heard from almost everyone he had escorted to the deck. He understood. The captain of the starship had drawn away the opaque shielding to reveal a clear wall two meters high and fifteen meters wide. To stand here with no lights behind you was to stand on the edge of space. A single object dominated the viewing wall: the green, blue, and white sphere that was Gauguin.

Clea grabbed Sean's elbow. "It's beautiful," she whispered.

Sean smiled. "You ain't seen nothin' yet," he answered.

Gauguin was indeed beautiful. Of all the habitable worlds the human race had found in the hundred years since the starship drive had made colonization of the galaxy possible, it was said that Gauguin was the closest to what Earth had once been.

In fact, many people thought Gauguin was even more beautiful than Old Earth, although it was considered "politically incorrect" to say so. Unlike most planets discovered so far, Gauguin had plenty of water. A great, interconnected ocean circled the globe; all three continents held scores of huge inland lakes tied together by mighty rivers; and almost everywhere, lesser bodies of water—minor lakes and rivers, ponds and streams—could be found in abundance. Only at the polar ice caps and in three small desert areas was

liquid water scarce.

Looking down at Gauguin, Sean felt a thrill of excitement at all there was to explore and discover, all the mysteries that might be waiting for them down there. He clamped down on the feeling the moment he identified it. Let others love it if they wanted. He couldn't afford that luxury. Gauguin was his fifth planet. He had no reason to think it would be his last.

CHAPTER TWO:

The Restless Planet

Zach Yamoto whistled contentedly as he ambled along the path to the Greendomes. The trail bordered the Tati, a small river that ran through Gauguin's first city, Ambora. Zach enjoyed the sound of the river splashing along beside him, and when he came to a small bridge he felt an almost irresistible urge to sit and dangle his feet for a while. He checked his watch. *Good!* By his calculations he had fifteen minutes before Grumps would consider him seriously overdue. To Zach's way of thinking, that changed mere desire into something resembling a moral obligation. "Definitely time to dangle," he said, slipping off his sandals and sliding his legs over the edge of the bridge. His feet came within inches of the water. He was wearing a shortsleeved boorman, the one-piece outfit favored by many in Ambora's semitropical climate. A light breeze

played through his shoulder-length brown hair. The rays of Gauguin's blue sun felt good on his bare arms and legs, which were the color of coffee mixed with milk.

It was a beautiful morning, made even more so by the fact that he had managed to skate through the first half of the day's drudge without actually doing anything he didn't want to.

He gazed down over Ambora. The five major domes of the city seemed to glow in the midmor-ning sunshine. Beyond them the great blue-green sweep of Sanjo Bay was joined by the laughing waters of the Tati. Beyond the bay, stretching endlessly into the distance, lay the great Kartai Sea itself.

Zach felt a great wave of contentment overwhelm him. After the incredible crowding of Earth, it was hard to believe his family had actually ended up in a place this beautiful. He used to resent the time his father spent on his job, but if this was the final reward, maybe it had been worth it.

His reverie was interrupted by a quufer scuttling across the bridge to nestle in beside him. Though the first settlers claimed the quufers had once been shy, like the theskies, they were now so friendly they were nearly always underfoot.

Zach smiled and ruffled the creature's scales, which were so long, thin, and soft that

everyone had initially thought they were hair.

"Kwoo," said the quufer, making the noise that had given the species its popular name. "Kwoo."

"What are you doing out here, fella?" asked Zach. He used the term "fella" lightly, since no one had yet figured out how to determine the sex of a quufer.

"Kwoo," responded the quufer, hunching into itself so that it became about the size and shape of a stack of dinner plates. The skin beneath its transparent scales grew dark, indicating contentment.

Human and quufer sat in companionable silence. Zach was just thinking that he should get moving when the quufer uttered a small shriek and turned bright green, the color of alarm. It stretched to its full length, about the distance from Zach's wrist to his shoulder, then raced away, its tiny legs scrabbling against the wood of the bridge. Zach watched in astonishment as the creature dove into the bushes at the edge of the path, where its green scales blended so effectively with the tropical foliage that it disappeared almost instantly.

"Now what was that all about?" he said to no one in particular. He wondered if the quufer had heard something he hadn't, something it considered a potential threat. The creatures were known to have incredibly acute hearing, better even than humans wearing amplification implants.

Shaking his head, Zach slipped into his sandals. Still trying to decipher the quufer's strange behavior, he returned to the trail leading to the Greendomes.

A door slid open as he approached the main dome. Zach stepped through and followed a corridor past the offices to the growing rooms, where he spotted Sean Matthews using an electronic clipboard to record the level of certain chemicals in the sprouting tanks. From the way Sean shook his head when Zach entered, it was clear the dark-haired boy was wondering how Zach managed to skate out of work so often.

Since he knew they would be in the same cohort when school started, Zach decided it would be smart to try to keep things flowing. "Been out procuring a vital chemical," he said, holding up the small bag he was carrying. "We were nearly out of it, so Grumps sent me to Central Storage to pick up some more."

"Nice job," said Sean, looking at Zach closely. "How did Grumps happen to choose you?"

Zach hesitated. "It's part of my system," he said at last.

"System?"

"Well, it's only a system now. But I'm hoping to refine it to the point where I can consider it a science. I'm going to write a book: *Zach Yamoto's Complete Guide to Skating."*

Sean made a face. "Skating" was the practice of trying to get out of as much work as possible. He had watched Zach long enough to know that the guy was a master skate. Having been brought up by parents who emphasized civic duty above everything, Sean found Zach's attitude pretty distasteful.

"So how did you manage it?" he asked again.

Zach shrugged. "As soon as I come in, I make it a point to check the supplies. Usually we have plenty of everything. But about once a week we're low enough that I can convince Grumps to send me out for replacements. Since I'd rather be outside than in here, I consider that a score."

Sean nodded, and turned back to his clipboard. But Zach didn't go away. "I hear you were part of the welcoming committee two days ago," he said. "Now *there's* a job I'd like! Traveling up to the High Station when the starships come in, checking out the new arrivals. Not bad, if you ask me."

Sean grunted.

"So," said Zach, "anyone 'interesting' aboard?"

Sean smiled in spite of himself. He knew what Zach was really asking. Clea Tourni definitely classified as "interesting."

"At least one," he conceded.

"So?" urged Zach.

Sean laughed. "Why should I tell you? Who wants to help the competition?"

Zach shrugged. "I thought you were tied up with Philippa Bidding?"

"We've gone out," said Sean cautiously, not mentioning that Philippa was supposed to meet him here at the end of his shift.

Sean had met Philippa the same way he met Clea Tourni; on a welcoming mission. She was very attractive, in an exotic sort of way, with skin and hair that were almost white. But unlike Clea,

who seemed warm and friendly, Philippa was reserved and distant. Sean found her company pleasant enough, yet somehow they never really seemed to connect. An evening with Philippa often left him feeling more lonely than an evening spent by himself.

And yet on one or two occasions, he had seen another side of her, as if she were letting go of something, dropping some kind of mask. When that happened, Philippa Bidding lit up in a way that was altogether different and altogether dazzling.

Sean had never had this kind of trouble with a girl before, and he didn't know what to make of it.

Nor was he about to discuss it with Zach Yamoto.

"Have you seen the newest topo maps?" he asked, hoping to change the subject.

"Boy, have I!" said Zach. "Did you notice that cave system they project about a hundred klicks south of here? I'd give anything to explore that. How about you? You like that kind of thing? I'd bet a week's ration credits it'll be two or three years before they get around to it. Maybe we could be the first."

Zach's enthusiasm was contagious— dangerously so, as far as Sean was concerned. He had no wish to talk about plans for something that probably wouldn't happen until his family was getting ready to ship out to the next planet.

Fortunately for Sean, Zach changed the subject on his own.

"Not bad!" he whispered, staring at the doorway. "Is she the one you met on the ship two days ago?"

Sean turned toward the door and saw Clea Tourni standing in the entry with a slip of green paper in her hand. She looked confused, but her face lit up when she saw Sean.

"Hi, Sean," she said, walking over to where the two boys stood. "I didn't know I'd find you here."

Zach, standing behind her, rolled his eyes in a clear indication that as far as he was concerned, some guys had all the luck. Sean took the hint and introduced him to Clea.

"You on drudge here?" asked Zach, glancing down at the green paper Clea was holding.

"I beg your pardon?" she asked.

"Drudge," said Zach. "You know, your 'voluntary' community service."

Clea smiled. "We call it 'harness duty' where I come from," she said.

"And where is that?" asked Zach.

"Galahad," said Clea.

"Ah, the Arthurian system," said Zach. "Some of those early star-hoppers were real romantics."

"I liked it there," said Clea defensively. "Where are you from, anyway? You talk funny."

It was Zach's turn to laugh. "Milady, what you are hearing from my lips is the original version of Earth Standard. Anything else is a local variant."

Clea's eyes went wide. "Are you really from Earth?" she asked in astonishment.

Zach nodded smugly.

"But I thought that was supposed to be the best planet in the galaxy. Why would anyone want to leave?"

"You're the victim of rumors," said Sean. "The Earthies have nearly destroyed the planet, and everyone knows it."

"Wow," said Zach. "That's heavy talk from someone whose father works for the Planetary League."

Sean started to say something, then stopped. "I've got to get this finished," he said, glancing down at his clipboard."You seem to have some spare time. Why don't you introduce Clea to Grumps?"

"Gladly take I the Galahadian," said Zach. "This way, if you will, milady."

Clea followed Zach between the long rows of clear plastic sprouting tanks. She turned back to say something to Sean, but he was already immersed in his work.

They found Grumps two domes over. He was a slender man, a little stooped, taller than Clea, but shorter than Zach. He had kinky black hair, liberally sprinkled with gray, and dark brown eyes flecked here and there with bits of orange. Deep lines ran from the sides of his noise to the corners of his mouth, and his scowl looked like it had been permanently carved into his face.

"So you're the newbie," he growled, when Zach introduced Clea.

"Y-y-yes sir," stammered Clea.

"Well you've picked a fine one to hang out with," he said, gesturing toward Zach.

Zach smiled benignly, as if he had just received a compliment.

"I just met him, sir," said Clea. Instantly she wished she could take back the words. She felt like a traitor.

"Well, come on," said Grumps. "I'll show you around. You—Yamoto. Get back to work."

"I was just on my way," said Zach, a statement so obviously untrue that Clea couldn't help but laugh.

Grumps snorted and gestured for Clea to follow him. "We have seven greendomes in this complex," he said, as Clea scurried to catch up with him. "As you probably know, the Planetary Settlement Act requires us to grow all our food in domes for the first five years."

"No," said Clea. "I didn't know."

He looked at her in surprise. "Where are you from, girl?" he asked.

"Galahad."

"Ah," he said, "one of the older worlds. By the time you were born you wouldn't have had to worry about this sort of thing. But here we have to be very careful about tampering with the basic ecology of our planet. Other than humanity and its attendant microbes, no alien life forms can be

released without an environmental-impact study."

"Why?" asked Clea. "I don't see what harm growing a patch of peas can do."

Grumps snorted again. "Didn't you ever hear about what happened on Plessius II?"

Clea shook her head.

"It was one of the first worlds colonized. The fools planted a new variety of squash, all excited because it was so hardy. Hardy is right. It turned out that the growth of the vines was stimulated by unusual trace elements in the soil, and their resistance to disease was jacked up by a native microbe. The damn things grew so well it was almost impossible to kill them! And they spread so fast that within three years they were starting to squeeze out a lot of native plant life—including a certain fern that provided the only hatching grounds for an insect that just happened to be the primary pollenator for several important plant species. No pollenation, no seeds. No seeds, no new plants. After that, it was like dominoes falling down. Those squash raised hell with the entire ecology. Within twenty years the idiots who planted them had managed to wipe out or seriously endanger over twenty thousand species of plants and animals."

"I see," said Clea, overwhelmed by the image of so much destruction from such a simple beginning.

Grumps snorted and led her into the next dome.

An hour later Clea found herself back in the first dome, trying to separate seedlings so they wouldn't become too cramped as they grew. She had already broken more than a dozen of the fragile stems, and was feeling clumsy and frustrated. The fact that when Grumps showed her the job, he had managed to separate over two dozen seedlings without damaging a single one did nothing to help her mood. She was still astonished by the tender, almost loving way his stubby fingers had pulled apart the plants.

She tried again and made a little noise of frustration as she destroyed another seedling.

"Having a hard time?" asked a deep, friendly voice.

She looked up and saw Sean Matthews standing beside her.

"I feel like a mass murderer," she said, pointing to the results of the last half hour's massacre.

"Here, let me show you," said Sean. Reaching past her, he deftly began separating the plants.

"How do you do that?" she asked.

Before he could answer, the world went crazy. It began with the floor, which started writhing under their feet like a snake. A noise, unlike any Clea had ever heard, seemed to fill the air. Soon the rows of sprouting tanks were vibrating so hard they were splashing their nutrient fluid into the air.

"What is it?" yelled Clea.

Before Sean could answer, she dove into his arms for safety.

CHAPTER THREE:

Do They Cancel School for Earthquakes?

It took only a few seconds for the world to begin behaving properly again. The rumbling faded away. The floor stopped moving. The tanks ceased their vibration.

As the earthquake subsided, so did Clea's panic. Slowly she became aware of her surroundings again, including the fact that she was being held by a pair of warm, strong arms. She looked up and saw Sean Matthews smiling down at her. She felt her cheeks grow warm.

"I'm sorry," she stammered, "I didn't mean to ... I didn't ... I was frightened, and..."

Stop babbling! she told herself firmly. She swallowed, and tried again. "I panicked."

"How convenient," said a sharp, cool voice from behind her.

The expression on Sean's face told Clea as much as the speaker's tone. She pushed herself

away from Sean and turned to find herself facing a girl who would have been breathtakingly beautiful, if not for her unnaturally pale skin. Long white-blond hair cascaded around her shoulders. The only real color in her face came from her intense, almost electric-blue eyes. A pale, cream-colored shirt and white shorts emphasized a figure that made Clea feel inadequate at best.

As she looked at the two of them—Sean, tall and handsome in his light blue boorman, the newcomer like a princess carved from ice—Clea wondered how they could be so calm after what had just happened. *How often do they have earthquakes around here anyway?* she wondered nervously,

"'lo, Philippa," said Sean casually. "Didn't see you come in."

"Too busy, I imagine," said Philippa, with a hint of a smile. "From the way the earth just moved, I assume you've discovered the secret of the cosmic kiss."

Clea felt herself blush.

The confrontation was interrupted by the arrival of Grumps, who came dashing into the dome with the tails of his lab coat flying out behind him. "Everyone all right in here?" he cried.

In her hyper-alert state, Clea realized that the concern in his voice was genuine. Gruff though he might be, the man really cared.

"Just fine," said Sean. "A little shook up is all."

"Get ready for the aftershock," said Grumps,

barely pausing on his way to check the next dome. "Better move outside. I doubt the

ceiling will crack, but there's no sense taking chances."

The three teenagers looked up at the silanna dome, which curved above them in a mottled blue-green arc.

"No sense taking any chances," echoed Sean. Grabbing Clea by the elbow, he steered her toward the door, snagging Philippa on the way.

The door's automatic opening mechanism was still functioning. "Lucky we were only working with seedlings," said Sean. "Otherwise we'd have to be checked for pollen before we could get out."

They found Zach in front of the next dome over, sitting on top of a large rock and looking down toward the city. He turned when he heard Sean's voice. "Doesn't seem to be much damage down there," he reported. "Lots of excitement, but no domes down."

He stopped speaking as the earth rumbled again. The rock he was sitting on began to sway.

"Aftershock," said Philippa.

Sean nodded. "Let's hope that's it."

"You three seem pretty calm," said Clea, her own voice edged with panic. "Does this kind of thing happen often?"

Sean and Philippa exchanged glances. "Not in the past," said Sean. "The past being only three years, as far as people actually being on the planet. But we were aware of the possibility. It's just happening sooner than we expected."

"You mean they brought colonists to a planet, knowing there would be earthquakes?" demanded Clea.

Sean shrugged. "Every planet has its dangers," he said. "No one expected this to start for some time yet. There are things that can be done; the process is already in motion."

"That the official party line?" asked Philippa.

A siren began to sound in the city. "All clear," said Zach. "Guess the whiz-brains have decided it's safe. Ain't science wonderful?"

"Wonderful," said Clea dully.

"You okay to make it home?" asked Sean.

I'll make sure she gets there," said Zach, sliding down.

"How about you?" asked Philippa, slipping her hand through the crook of Sean's arm. "Are you ready?"

"For what?" he asked.

She raised one pale eyebrow. "I thought we had a date," she said, her voice throaty, offended.

"Silly boy," said Zach, "to let a little thing like an earthquake drive the really important matters out of his head."

Clea was surprised to see that Zach remained standing after the look Philippa shot him. The foursome said their farewells, awkward but mercifully brief, and Zach and Clea watched as Sean and Philippa started down the hill.

"Now there goes a happy couple," said Zach, leaning against the rock.

"I'm not sure what's going on," said Clea. She

realized she was till trembling from the earthquake.

"It's simple," said Zach. "No one else in Ambora is good enough for either one of them. So even though they're not all that crazy about each other, they're stuck. Who else could they date?" He grinned at Clea, taking the edge out of his words. "Ain't romance wonderful?"

"Wonderful," she echoed dully.

Philippa put down her glass and stared at Sean in delight. "The opening-day speech?" she said in surprise. "But that's wonderful!"

"Are you kidding? I don't want to stand up there in front of all those kids and tell them how great Bradbury School is going to be. I can't believe my father volunteered me for this. Everyone will think I'm a total toroid."

"Well don't make a toroid speech," she said. "Say something important."

Sean snorted. "How can I say anything important in a speech like this?"

Philippa seemed to close in on herself. "I don't know," she said quietly. "I guess you can't if you don't have anything to say."

Sean sighed and turned his attention to his milkshake which had been manufactured from genuine, hydroponically grown Vespen ling beans.

Later that evening he walked Philippa to her home, a complex of blue-green domes not far from his own family's spot on Admin Hill. She

gave him a quick kiss on the cheek and disappeared inside.

He didn't care that she didn't ask him in. As he walked away, he found himself remembering how Clea Tourni had felt in his arms.

Fifteen hours later Sean was standing in front of his bathroom mirror, trying to practice his speech. He had spent the night before writing it, and the floor of his bedroom was still littered with innumerable versions of the thing that he had run off on his printer, read once, then crumpled and thrown away in disgust.

He put down the latest, still totally unsatisfactory draft, and stared at his reflection. He hadn't slept well, and it showed. The whites of his large green eyes—normally so clear

and alert-looking—were filled with jagged lines that looked like little red bolts of lightning.

"What a way to start school," he muttered, angrier than ever with his father for sticking him with this job. He didn't even have the consolation of having a girl friend to turn to for sympathy. When Philippa had called to give him another pep talk, his sullen reaction had offended her, and the conversation had turned into an argument. Finally both of them had clicked off in anger.

He shoved all that out of his head and tried to concentrate on his speech. If he had to make a fool out of himself by delivering the damn thing, he might as well do a good job on it. He was about three sentences into it when the bottles in

the medicine cabinet began to rattle. Still facing the mirror, Sean saw himself jump a little; his bloodshot eyes opened to about twice their normal size.

I wonder if they cancel school for earthquakes, he thought hopefully.

His mother came bustling down the hall to ask if he was all right.

"I'm fine," said Sean. "That was just a little burp compared to yesterday. But 1 bet people are getting nervous. What's Dad have to say about all this?"

Alison Matthews shrugged. "He left for a meeting with the geological team early this morning. And I have to leave for a meeting with the other' architects in about ten minutes. We'll spend the day running simulations to see just what level of quake the buildings can survive."

Sean knew that his mother and the other architects had done that kind of work on their computers before any of the buildings had actually been erected. But conditions were different on every world, and the silicon-based silanna settlers used for "growing" their houses took on slightly different properties according to local conditions. The quake activity would force the architects to speed up their research program—and possibly slow down the building program. Sean wondered if the quakes would affect plans for the next wave of immigration.

He followed his mother into the kitchen. She resumed her place at the table while he punched

a few buttons in the nutrition center. The stuff that poured into his glass was a compromise: medium tasty and medium healthy. He didn't have time for anything else.

"All set for your speech?" asked his mother.

Sean grunted. His mood was not improved when he found a little envelope at his place. It had his name on it, printed in his father's unmistakable style. He tore open the note.

"Sean: I'm sorry I can't be here to see you off for your first morning at Bradbury, but this earthquake problem takes precedence right now. Good luck with your speech this morning. You know I'm counting on you to do a good job; it's important for the kids to

start off with the right attitude about school.

See you tonight.

Love, Dad"

"What about *my* attitude?" asked Sean.

His mother laid her hand over his. "This governorship is a big opportunity for your father," she said. "He needs all the support he can get— from both of us."

"Yeah, I know," said Sean. "But I doubt this speech is going to make any difference to anyone except me. By tomorrow everyone will forget what I said. All they'll remember is that I'm the jerk who stood up the first day of school and told them how great it was all going to be."

His mother laughed. "Maybe you need to find

another way to phrase it," she said gently. "Come on—we'd better get moving. I'll give you a lift."

"Thanks, but I think I'll walk," said Sean. Ambora was still a small community, and most of the others would be walking. At this point he didn't want to do anything that was going to make him stand out any more than necessary. Besides, he might run into Philippa—or maybe Clea—along the way.

Bradbury School was located in the Education Center, one of the five main civic domes that formed the center of Ambora. As Sean made his way toward the Tati River, he saw other kids heading toward the school; most of them were familiar to him by sight, if not by name.

The silanna-built houses nestled like giant jewels among the lush green foliage of the gentle hills. It was warm already, but they would probably have a rainstorm later in the day—they had a short storm nearly every afternoon—that would wash away the heat and cool things down. The breeze sweeping down from the mountains smelled pleasantly of forest. Except for this stupid speech, it was a wonderful morning.

He didn't meet either Clea or Philippa along the way, and there was no one else he felt like talking to. He followed the Tati into the center of town, where the five big domes clustered around a thirty-foot waterfall. Two of the domes flanked the head of the falls, the other three were at the base. All five were connected by curving tubes grown from silanna.

Sean entered the Med Center. Like all the domes, it had a wide corridor circling the inside wall which provided both access to the inner areas and a walkway for pedestrians just passing through. Sean followed the corridor about halfway around, then took an escalator up to the tube that would lead him over the Tati, to the Education Center.

"To my doom, that is," muttered Sean.

He stood in the middle of the tube. To his left the river was plunging over the cliff, creating a spray that left little droplets all over the side of the tube. To his right the river rolled on down to Sanjo Bay, where it would eventually join the waters of the great ocean, losing itself all together. Sean looked at the river in envy; right now disappearing into the Kartai seemed like a wonderful idea. He sighed and headed for school.

Zach Yamoto spotted him almost as soon as he entered the Ed Dome. With Clea at his side, he came scurrying over to greet Sean. "Okay, give," he said. "What's going on?"

"What are you talking about?" replied Sean sharply. He had enough troubles this morning; he was in no mood for any of Zach's nonsense.

"There's something big going on," said Zach, "and since you're the governor's son, I figured you'd know what it is. So, what is it?"

"What makes you think there's something big going on?" asked Sean.

"I was just having a talk with old X-Ray Ives," said Zach.

"Who?" asked Clea.

"He runs the school," said Sean. "I'll explain later."

"Anyway," continued Zach, "I was trying to get him to see why I should be excused from math and history—"

Sean raised a questioning eyebrow.

"Well, it didn't hurt to try," said Zach. "I might have made it, too, if Mr. Santori hadn't come scuttling up and passed him that note. Ives took one look at it and told me to scram. From the look on his face, whatever was in that note was hot news. So—what is it?"

"I don't have the slightest idea," said Sean.

Zach looked crushed. "Space!" he said. "You're as worthless as I am!"

Sean was trying to decide whether to laugh or to punch him when the bell rang.

"Come on," he said, motioning toward the auditorium. "If it's really that big, we'll probably find out in there. If not, you'll still get to watch me make a total jerk out of myself. Either way you ought to have a good time."

"What do you mean?" asked Clea.

"Just wait," said Sean. "You'll find out soon enough."

A younger student handed them each a folded piece of paper as they walked through the door. Sean glanced at the program and groaned when he saw his name.

Dr. Ives was standing near the door. When he spotted Sean he called his name and beckoned to

him. Sean crossed to join the man. Clea watched Dr. Ives, who was remarkably tall,

bend over and whisper to Sean. The dark-haired boy nodded and whispered back.

"Well, what was that all about?" demanded Zach, when Sean returned to where he and Clea were waiting.

"I'm not entirely certain," said Sean. "But you were right about one thing: whatever's going on, is big—big enough that they've canceled this morning's program. Since I was supposed to be speaking, Dr. Ives thought I should know. But that was all he would tell me. Come on, let's find a seat."

Letting Zach and Clea lead the way, Sean struggled with conflicting feelings. The first was enormous relief that he didn't have to give the speech. The second was the certain knowledge, gathered from life on five different planets, that in almost all cases the bigger the news, the worse it was.

CHAPTER FOUR:

Caravan to Catalan

Clea looked around eagerly as the other students continued to file into the auditorium. She envied Sean, who had been here on Gauguin for over two years. He was used to the place; he had had a chance to get to know almost everyone.

Despite all the tapes and holoreels she and her family had viewed before they left Galahad, it seemed like she didn't know anything about Gauguin. She had seen it. But she wasn't *part of it.* She felt a sudden, desperate yearning to be back on Galahad where she belonged.

"You all right?" asked Zach, leaning toward her.

She nodded, wondering how she had given herself away. To her embarassment, she realized she had tears on her cheeks.

"How long have *you* been here?" she asked,

more to direct attention away from herself than for any other reason.

"About six months, Earth time," said Zach. "It's been pretty good, so far. But I've been dreading this day ever since we got here."

"What do you mean?"

"Well this place was pretty good when I arrived. They were still doing set-up work, not too many people around, no one much interested in what I was doing. But now that the first round of terraforming is finished, that's all going to change. Now we're going to be civilized." He shivered. "Now they're going to start worrying about my education again."

"Don't you want to get an education?" asked Clea.

"Of course I do!" said Zach. "That's why I hate school so much."

The conversation was interrupted by the arrival of Philippa Bidding. Her white-blond hair was tied back in a ponytail, and she was hanging onto the arm of a good-looking boy.

"I'd like you all to meet Arkady Davidov," she said. "Arkady, this is Sean Matthews and Zach Yamoto and—oh, I'm sorry. I guess Sean never did introduce us."

Sean moved uncomfortably in his seat.

"My name is Clea Tourni," said Clea, trying to keep her tone as gracious as possible.

Arkady shook hands with each of them, his face serious and unsmiling.

Clea took the chance to examine the new-

comer. He was a little shorter than Sean, with close-cropped light brown hair, large eyes, and full, sensuous-looking lips. His khaki-colored boorman was belted at the middle and equipped with numerous pockets. The short sleeves and legs—turned up twice to form crisp cuffs about three centimeters wide—revealed remarkably well-developed arms and legs.

Zach raised an eyebrow. "You must work out," he said.

"Daily," replied Arkady.

"Look, Arkady," said Philippa, squeezing his arm, "there's a couple of seats over there. You'll excuse us, won't you?" she said, turning to the others.

"Of course," said Sean.

Zach whistled softly as they walked away. "That must have been a hell of a fight you two had last night," he said.

"Who says we had a fight?" snapped Sean.

Before Zach could answer the tallest boy Clea had ever seen stopped at the edge of their row. "Excuse me," he said, pushing in past Sean. "Excuse me, sorry, excuse me."

Clea watched in amusement as he worked his way toward the empty seat in the center of the row. He looked as fragile as a house made of cards. She was half afraid someone would sneeze and knock him over. "Who's that?" she asked Sean.

He shrugged. "I don't have any idea. The population here has doubled in the last two months.

I've been on most of the greeting crews, but I've still only met a fraction of the people coming in."

She nodded. The hum of voices in the auditorium grew quiet as the lights dimmed and Dr. Ives walked to the center of the stage.

Clea leaned over to Sean. "Why did Zach call him X-Ray Ives?" she asked.

"Rumor has it he can see right into people's heads," said Sean. "Besides, his eyes glow in the dark."

Clea made a little clicking sound at the side of her mouth to indicate her disgust.

"I'm not kidding," he whispered. "At least, not about the glow-in-the-dark part. It happens to everyone who spends too much time on Alphorion. Philippa's eyes are the same way. It's a little spooky."

Clea found herself wondering how much time Sean had spent in the dark with Philippa.

Dr. Ives ran a hand over his bald head, which glistened in the overhead lights. "Good morning, and welcome to Bradbury School," he said. "I feel this institution is well named, honoring, as it does, one of Earth's greatest visionary writers. For what we have taken on here is a visionary task—the settling and claiming of a new home for the increasingly far-flung human race."

"Oh, spare me," whispered Zach.

"Unfortunately, Bradbury will not open this morning after all."

Zach sat straight up in his seat. "Amazing," he whispered. "That's the first time anyone ever

actually paid attention when I said that."

"As you all know," continued Dr. Ives, "we have been experiencing a sudden increase in seismic activity. The problem itself is not unexpected; the geological team had already begun to work on the situation. The timing, however, is a surprise to everyone, and the matter has just been reclassified as a Type A emergency. That means everyone from the Third and Fourth Cohorts will be working on it."

"Real work!" said Zach.

Sean looked at him in astonishment; the skate actually seemed pleased by the idea.

Dr. Ives turned toward the edge of the stage and nodded. His assistant, Mr. Santori, walked on, carrying a long, metallic-looking rod.

"Of course," said Clea. "A Fault Finder!"

"Are you talking about Ives, Santori, or that metal rod?" asked Zach.

Clea shushed him.

"This a Fault Finder," said Dr. Ives, taking the device from Santori. "Or, to be more precise, a device for locating lines of stress within the earth's surface. When planted deep enough in Gauguin's crust, these devices will serve two purposes. First, they will feed our instruments vital information on the shifting tectonic plates that are causing the current problem. Second, and even more important, when several thousand such devices are linked in a network around a major faultline, they can actually be used to dissipate the stress and energy that lead to major

earthquakes. In the best case, the Fault Finders can completely prevent a quake. Even in less than the best circumstances, they can often significantly reduce a quake's magnitude."

Ives handed the Fault Finder back to Santori.

"The long-term plan has always been to plant a network of Fault Finders in the Lowentrout Fault, which runs along the inner edge of the Catalans. The long-term plan has just become the short-term plan. The main computer is doing a third run on the logistical planning right now. We will have maps, routes, and planting sites by noon, which is the time at which you are all to be hack here, ready to leave. The people who passed out programs on the way in will give you packing sheets on the way out. These will tell you what you need to bring for yourselves, and what will be provided by the supply house."

Dr. Ives mopped his brow. "I apologize for the suddenness of all this. I know you are all devastated to learn that your formal education will be delayed in this manner."

The students began to hoot; Dr. Ives actually smiled as he waited for the noise to die down. "I think I can guarantee you that within a week we will be back on schedule. Until then, please take care of yourselves. I would like to see *all* of you back here when school opens."

Clea felt a sudden stab of worry. How dangerous was this expedition going to be?

Philippa was standing in the yard behind her

family's dome, staring at the mountains. Her thoughts were interrupted by a synthesized voice saying, "Perhaps you should come in now, dear."

Philippa sighed as she turned to her loco. The mechanical child-care device—an INtegrated LOcal COntrol PARENTAL Information System, informally called an IN LOCO PARENTIS, and known to every kid in the Federation as a *loco—was* waiting behind her with a sweater over its arm.

"I'm all right, loco dear," she said. As she spoke, she knelt and opened a panel on the loco's side. Reaching into the opening, she adjusted a wire she had installed some time ago.

"All right, Philippa," said the loco placidly. "I'll see you inside."

Philippa watched in amusement as the loco rolled back into the dome. Though most kids experimented with reprogramming their locos, very few of them were as successful at it as Philippa.

The loco gone, she turned her eyes west, then north, following the line of the Catalan Mountains as they cupped around Ambora. She knew, from maps and holovids, that the Catalans continued in a northeast line for about three hundred kilometers until they merged with the Cynthians, a north-south running range of mountains considerably taller

and more precipitous than the relatively gentle Catalans. The Lowentrout Fault lay along that line.

"One more thing to do," she said. "One more place to go."

"Do," said a raucous voice nearby, "go!"

Looking around, Philippa spotted the dark brown head of a theskie peering at her from the foliage. Its orange eyes blinked comically in the sunshine.

"Oh, come here," she said, holding out her hand.

The theskie trotted out of the bushes, obviously hoping to have its head scratched. Two meters long from nose to tail, it ran on thickly muscled legs that supported its rounded body. It held its tiny front legs—or arms—extended in front of it, as if reaching for something. In many ways the creature reminded Philippa of pictures she had seen of some of Earth's ancient dinosaurs.

"I'm glad you guys are so friendly," she said. "Otherwise you'd be pretty scary." Despite her mood, Philippa found herself smiling.

"Do! Go!" said the theskie again.

Philippa ran her fingers over the theskie's scales. They were almost feathery in their softness. The dark brown coat was mottled with white spots. When the theskie lifted its head she chucked it under the chin, where the color began to soften to the buff tones that covered its belly.

"Yep yep yep," chuckled the theskie happily.

"You guys are crazy," said Philippa.

"Crazy!" agreed the theskie, ducking its long

neck to force its head up under her hand. "Do! Go! Crazy!"

Philippa shuddered. The theskie's words were too close to what she had been thinking for comfort.

She was so *alone* here on Gauguin. If only she had someone she could talk to, someone she could confide in. But she had enough troubles already without telling anyone why one of the leading families of Alphorion had suddenly "chosen" to move to a newly opened planet like Gauguin.

"Crazy?" chuckled the theskie happily.

"Oh, go away!" cried Philippa, flapping her arms at the beast. It clucked in alarm and ran back into the bushes.

Philippa remained in the yard, rubbing her hands over her arms and staring up into the mountains.

I'm not ready for this, thought Clea, as she approached the Five Domes. *I haven't been*

here long enough.

She had discussed the matter with her mother, who had assured her that if she really felt that way she could be excused from the Caravan. But, Dr. Tourni had also pointed out, to do so would separate her from the other students at a time when they were forming important friendships. If Clea didn't go on the expedition, she would be more of an outsider than ever.

So she was going. But she still wasn't sure it was a good idea.

Adjusting the straps on her backpack, Clea tugged down the cuffs on her blue boorman and made her way to the edge of the crowd gathered outside the domes.

"All set?" asked a friendly voice.

She turned and saw Zach Yamoto smiling at her. "I think so," she said cautiously. "I'm feeling kind of nervous."

"Don't," said Zach "It'll be fun."

"Some people have a strange idea of fun," said Sean Matthews, strolling up beside them. Despite his words, the look on his face told Clea that he was enjoying this, too. Besides, she remembered, he was off the hook about giving that speech. No wonder he was looking so relaxed and happy.

She started to ask him where Philippa was, then thought better of it. Before the silence could become uncomfortable, a loud voice came booming over the crowd.

"This is Governor Matthews speaking."

Clea looked at Sean. He rolled his eyes.

"I appreciate your cooperation with Operation Earthquake," the governor continued. "I know many of you have interrupted other important work to participate."

"Not me," said Zach.

"They're not just sending the goof-offs," said Sean.

"They're not?" asked Zach, sounding surprised.

"Shhh!" hissed Clea. "I want to hear Sean's father."

Governor Matthews was in midsentence. "—fifteen hoverbuses, with twenty people each. Teams will work about five kilometers apart, planting Fault Finders according to maps worked out by geologists on the main computer. You will receive further instructions as you travel. If those students in the Third Cohort will move to the south side of the Plaza, your instructors will start boarding the buses. Students in the Fourth Cohort, please move to the north."

Clea walked with Sean and Zach to the south side of the Plaza.

"Greetings, heroes," said a youngish man, speaking into a pocket mike. "My name is

Marc Oblitt, and, assuming we make it back here alive, I'll be teaching some of you history next week. For now, I'm unit leader. There's about a hundred and thirty of you here. We've filled the remaining spots with scientists, teachers, and a handful of volunteers. I'm going to load the buses by teams, which have been determined according to some mysterious ritual performed by three geologists, a shrink, and a computer. Ours is not to reason why, but simply to plant Fault Finders. When I call your name and bus number, please board as quickly as possible."

Clea listened intently for her name. To her disappointment, neither Zach nor Sean was on her bus. To her irritation, they were both on the same bus as Philippa.

On the other hand, Philippa's friend Arkady was on her bus, a fact she didn't realize until he broke in on her bad mood by asking if he could sit with her.

"Please do," she said, moving her pack onto her lap.

Arkady piled into the seat next to her.

"So, what planet are you from?" he asked.

William Whitehorse Mornette, nearly two meters tall and still growing, folded himself uncomfortably into the last seat left on the bus. He sat with his eyes fixed straight ahead. His heart was beating wildly in his chest. This entire situation filled him with dread.

I should have stayed home, he thought. / *could have gotten out of this if I had really tried. I should have tried.*

He closed his eyes and imagined himself back on Acedium, where the terrors of the world were kept out by domes, and gravity was what it should be—which was to say about one sixth of what it was here.

His father had painted Gauguin as a new paradise.

Will felt like he had been given an invitation to hell.

The fact that his loathsome half-brother was on the same bus only made things worse. Paul shouldn't even be in the Third Cohort; he was too young. Being so brilliant, he had been pushed ahead, uncommon in an educational system that

had been designed to make room for especially bright kids.

The bus started to move, quickly leaving the city behind.

"There's the Gandria road," said the driver, a dark-haired professor named Katya Kovitch. She was pointing off to the left. "The Gandrians will be sending out some teams, too—though not as many as we are, of course."

Will looked in the direction she had pointed. Gandria, the only other settlement on Gauguin, was really more of a mining town than a city; its population was much smaller than that of Ambora. Even so, he found himself looking over his shoulder until the Gandria road was out of sight. When it disappeared, he felt like they had left their last

link to civilization behind. Soon— too soon—only the buses and the dimly marked road they followed spoke of anything other than a wild, rough planet, daring them to try themselves against its dangers.

Before long they reached the edge of the true jungle. Will stared in awe at the enormous trees. *Hard to imagine that this has been here, undisturbed, for thousands of years,* he thought.

The great forest closed around them, and Will began to feel that he was entering a place not only ancient and mysterious, but somehow almost sacred.

The idea made him shiver.

CHAPTER FIVE:

Over the River

Clea stared through the window of the hoverbus as the forest closed around them. Thick vines stretched from tree to tree, so numerous in some places they created what seemed like a second floor in the great structure of the woods. Hanging clumps of moss dropped from the twisting branches of thick-trunked trees. Dark shapes crawled along vines or peered out from beneath umbrellalike leaves.

Clea wished she had paid more attention to those briefing sessions back on Galahad. What were those animals? And how tall did these trees grow anyway? She turned away from the window. "It's dark here," she said with a shiver.

Arkady nodded. "This climate is as pleasant for plants as it is for people. It will be a constant struggle to keep the forest from reclaiming Ambora."

She looked at him. "Do you really think so?" she said. "With all our equipment and technology?"

He shrugged. "Unless we kill the forest permanently, which would be very bad for us, it will continue to grow. Which means we will have to continue to fight it."

Clea knew what Arkady said was true. Yet the idea made the forest seem almost sinister. She decided to change the subject. "Why do you spend so much time working out?" she asked.

Arkady smiled. "What makes you think I spend a lot of time at it?"

She glanced at his arm; even relaxed, the bicep strained against the fabric of his khaki-colored boorman. "People don't usually get that way by accident," she said.

"Actually, they do where I come from," he replied. "The gravity here on Gauguin is ninety-eight percent of Earth normal—hardly enough difference from what our bodies are designed for to notice. But Theta, where I was raised, has a gravity right at the edge

of what humans can bear. Just walking around on my world was like lifting weights."

"It sounds awful," said Glea.

"You get used to it. My problem now is that Gauguin is much too easy. It feels wonderful, in a way. But if I don't work out every day, I'll lose my muscle tone before long. Then it would be very hard to go home."

"Isn't your family planning to stay on Gauguin?" asked Clea.

Arkady shrugged. "I do not have to do everything my family does. I am sixteen years old. In a few years I will be able to apply for planetary transfer if I want. Then—I intend to go home."

Though he was not angry, or at least not angry at her, Arkady suddenly looked very frightening.

Clea turned and looked back out the window. At least the forest was on the other side of the glass.

"You're kidding," said Sean, looking at Zach in astonishment. "You have *four* brothers?"

"And two sisters," said Zach. "Can't forget Lilith and Portia. Makes them cranky."

"And you lived on one planet all your life?"

"Until we came here. Good ole Mother Earth herself."

Sean shook his head. The longest he had ever lived on a single planet was four Earth standard years—and that had been when he was a baby. He barely remembered it. He looked out the window of the hoverbus, wondering what it would be like to have a real home.

After a moment it struck him that even though Zach had been given the kind of stability he had always wanted himself, it must have made it that much harder for him when he had to let go of that home. After all, when Sean's own father had announced that they were leaving Vespen for Gauguin, he had been irritated, but not surprised.

He had learned early on that if you didn't connect to things, it didn't hurt so much when you left them behind. What had it been like for Zach, to leave behind a place he had lived all his life?

"Not as hard as you think," said Zach, when Sean asked him about it. "To begin with, despite all the stuff you hear about Earth being the cradle of the human race, the mother of all culture, etc., blah, blah, blah, the place is a pit. It shouldn't be—didn't used to be. But boy have they messed that planet up. I couldn't wait to get off."

"I've heard that," said Sean.

In fact he had occasionally repeated the idea himself, though it was considered somewhat traitorous. It made him sad; he preferred the golden vision of the holovids to what people were saying Earth had really become.

"Anyway," continued Zach, "this is the time in a guy's life when he *wants* some adventure. So when Dad told us we were shipping out for a newly opened planet, I thought it was a great idea. Besides, it wasn't like I was really leaving home. When you've got a family as big as mine, home tends to be anyplace where you're all together."

Sean nodded, thinking that Zach didn't seem to have any idea how incredibly lucky he really was.

Philippa was just starting to doze off when Marc Oblitt, who was driving their bus, turned on the

speaker system and began making announcements.

"Keep your eyes open through here," he said, his voice more casual and friendly than she expected from a teacher. "We'll be passing through some pretty spectacular areas. Since these hoverbuses are so quiet, you may get to see some wildlife that isn't quite as forward as the theskies and quufers."

That got a slight laugh from some of the kids.

"About fifteen kilometers from here the road forks. I don't want you to get nervous when you see us heading away from the rest of the buses. Remember, we have to string the Fault Finders over a huge area. For whatever reason, this crew has been given the privilege of making the longest trip. Along with one other bus, we'll be heading for an observation station almost at the end of the Catalans. Lucky us—we'll get to be real explorers. Big waterfall coming up on our left in about ten minutes. End of message for now."

Philippa closed her eyes. How had she gotten herself into this? Stupid question. She knew how she had gotten herself into it. By being stupid. If she'd had more brains, her family would still be on Alphorion where they belonged—and she wouldn't be stuck on a hoverbus in the middle of the jungle on a backwater planet light years away from anything that mattered. Light years from the boy who really mattered.

She closed her eyes and tensed every muscle in her body. The action was an alternative to cry-

ing, which she'd be damned if she'd do here on this stupid bus. Without realizing what she was doing, she began slowly thumping her fist against the arm of her seat.

"Hey," said the brown-haired girl next to her, who had introduced herself as Yadira Odetts. "Watch it!"

Philippa stopped her arm in midswing. "Sorry," she said, without opening her eyes. "I'll be more careful next time."

But she was speaking to herself, not Yadira. She hoped they would reach their destination soon. Things weren't so bad when she was busy, when her mind and her hands were occupied.

At a cry of surprise from the others, she opened her eyes. To their left a large waterfall tumbled into a sparkling pond. Lolling beside it was a crested, lizardlike creature nearly ten meters long. It watched lazily as the bus turned off the main road, barely visible in itself, to travel on an even less well-marked path.

"Too bad they can't cut this baby loose," said *Zach.* "We *would have been there by now."*

Sean nodded. They had been on the road for nearly six hours, and though the hoverbuses could easily do 120 kilometers per hour on an open stretch, he doubted they had traveled at more than a third that speed for most of the journey. He was glad the vehicle had a relief room; otherwise they would have lost even more time.

They had left the forest and were traveling

along the north side of the valley that separated the Catalans from the lower hills to the south. The mountains stretched upward to their left. Only rarely did one of them push its way above the timberline. For the most part they were carpeted with lush plant life, broken here and there by stark areas of bare rock.

Sean was pleased by the fact that the other hoverbus that had come this far was the one carrying Clea Tourni.

The two buses had crossed numerous small streams and rivers without incident. They didn't even require a bridge for the smaller ones; the hover mechanisms made it possible to simply skim across the surface of the water. The wider streams, or the ones with banks too steep for the hover mechanisms, were spanned by makeshift wooden bridges erected by the scientists who had first explored this area. The bridges were still in use by the crews that rotated their time between Ambora and the string of observatories and communications towers that marched across the top of the Catalans; it was the crews' occasional usage that had kept the jungle from completely reclaiming the road.

Sean realized that the small, gentle rivers had lulled their expectations. Despite Marc Oblitt's warning, none of them were quite prepared for what they came to next.

They heard it first—a dull, rumbling sound that initially made Sean think they were experiencing another earthquake. Then they rounded a bend

in the road and saw it—a wide, almost rampaging river that came roaring down over a huge waterfall on their left, only to disappear into a wide gorge that cut straight across the rock bed over which they were traveling. Sean wondered how deep the gorge was. From where he was sitting, it was impossible to see the bottom.

"Will you look at that!" cried Zach, leaning across Sean to get a better view out of the window. "Now that's what I call a waterfall!"

Marc slowed the bus as they approached the gorge. "Hate to interrupt anyone's rest," he said over the speaker system, "but you might want to get a look at this while you can. You won't see its like very often."

Everyone pushed to the left side of the bus to get a better look at the breathtaking sight, causing the vehicle to tip to one side. It took a moment for the balance system to recalibrate itself and correct the tilt.

The gorge was nearly a hundred meters across. A specially constructed flexite bridge about three meters wide spanned the chasm.

Sean knew the design well. The bridge would be made of two slender poles spun from the same material used for the sky elevators. About every half meter a thumb-thick crossbar of the same material would connect the two main poles. The whole thing was wrapped in paper-thin sheets of the same material, then treated with a combination of chemicals and ultraviolet light that would cause the flexite to become extremely rigid.

Sean knew from experience that the flexite poles extended about twenty meters beyond either lip of the gorge. The four ends would be firmly anchored. The bridges had been designed for this kind of wilderness use, and were considered very safe. They only *looked* incredibly flimsy.

Oblitt slowed the bus as they drove onto the bridge. The other bus was about ten meters ahead of them. As the two hovercraft crept slowly over the gorge Sean wondered if the drivers were being cautious, or simply giving everyone a chance to enjoy the scenery.

Well, the view *was* spectacular. As they neared the center of the bridge he looked directly out at the waterfall. It was at least forty meters wide, and now that he could see the whole thing he realized it was nearly two hundred meters high—starting a hundred meters above the edge of the gorge, and stretching another hundred meters straight down to the bottom. A huge plume of spray shot up from the place where the water landed.

The sides of the gorge were so steep it looked as if they had been cut from the rock with a huge carving knife. Except for an occasional heroic vellkul tree, the gorge walls were composed entirely of black and red rock. The river thundered out from the base of the falls, over a series of rocky rapids that continued to slope downward at about thirty-degree angle.

The roar of the falls was so loud that no one

actually heard the earthquake when it started. Sean, who was looking down at the base of the falls, heard someone in front of him scream. He snapped his head up and saw a huge chunk of rock, twice the size of a hoverbus, separate from the lip of the falls and tumble into the gorge.

Now the roar was on them, merging with that of the falls, deafening, heart stopping. People were screaming, leaping back from the windows, as if that would protect them.

"Stop it!" bellowed Marc Oblitt's amplified voice."Hold still! I'm having a hard time keeping us on the bridge as it is."

His words were lost in the panic and chaos that erupted on the bus. Looking forward, Sean could see the first bus picking up speed, trying to get across the bridge. To his

horror he also saw the far lip of the gorge grind to the right, pulling the edge of the bridge with it. Huge chunks of black rock split away from the cliff and hurtled out of sight.

As Sean watched the world fall apart around him he felt like time was slowing down. He looked to his left; the waterfall actually seemed to be vibrating. He flinched as the bus lurched forward, tipped sideways, and lurched again. The bridge couldn't possibly survive this punishment. They had to get off, and fast.

He wished people would stop screaming. How could Marc think to drive with this noise going on?

The bus began moving backward.

Sean closed his eyes. His insides felt like they were going to erupt.

Suddenly he heard a snap—high and clear, distinct from the general rumble—and realized with a sinking heart that one of the flexite poles had come loose from its anchor.

He could see the bridge begin to warp in front of them.

CHAPTER SIX:

The Leader of the Pack

Will Mornette watched in fascination as the hoverbus raced toward the end of the rippling bridge. He could feel the floating vehicle buck in response to the movements of the flexite surface. Suddenly the bridge twisted sideways, sending them sliding perilously close to its right edge.

For a horrible moment Will found himself staring down into the gorge. He held his breath, certain they were going to go over. Then the driver managed, somehow, to correct their course. She slammed in all the power she could. The bus shot forward, past the edge of the bridge, which was lifting even as they crossed it.

They were on solid ground. Only at that moment the "solid ground" seemed as precarious as the terrifying bridge had been. The only advantage here was that there was no place to fall.

Unless, thought Will, *a chasm should open underneath us.* Even as the thought crossed his mind, he felt the bus begin to move downward.

He closed his eyes and grabbed for the seat in front of him.

The inside of the hoverbus still on the bridge was absolute chaos. People were screaming and shoving, even struggling to get out of the bus.

As if that would do them any good, thought Philippa grimly. She turned toward the

window. As the bus rocked from side to side the waterfall and the gorge walls swung across her field of vision like some insane holovid. She closed her eyes; it was too terrifying to watch.

Then one of the fools at the front of the bus *(why* couldn't *those idiots stay in their seats?)* stumbled and fell forward. He landed on Marc, knocking his hands off the wheel and pushing him sideways so that his head struck the window. Suddenly, the world held still again. But the driverless hoverbus continued to wobble back and forth on the twisted remains of the bridge. A hundred meters below, the raging river swirled around jagged rocks that had fallen from the cliffs and now thrust like newly sprouted fangs from the surface of the water.

The lead hoverbus settled to the ground with a sigh. Dr. Kovitch pushed the button marked DOOR and the entire front of the vehicle began

to lift up. The terrified passengers crowded into the aisle.

/ *wonder if they think we'll be any safer outside the bus than inside,* thought Clea crossly.

"Come on," said Arkady, grabbing her by the elbow and hauling her to her feet. "We may be able to help."

She didn't understand what he meant, until they were outside and she saw that the second bus, the one carrying Sean and Zach, was stuck on the twisted remains of the bridge.

"What can we do?" she whispered in horror.

"I don't know," said Arkady. "Let's wait and see."

Sean had stayed quietly in his seat throughout the earthquake. He was as frightened as the others; his heart seemed to be trying to beat its way out of his chest, and the blood was singing in his ears. But he had also been aware that there was nothing he could do.

Now he could no longer afford that detachment. Those who had given in to panic were threatening everyone's lives. If they didn't hold still they were apt to nudge the bus from its precarious position on the bridge and send it plummeting into the gorge below.

Despite the ringing in his ears, his senses seemed to be wildly alert—he had a sense of heightened control, heightened power.

"Shut up and hold still!" he roared. "Now!"

His voice, crisp, clear, and in command, had a

calming effect on those not totally lost to panic. In turn, they tried to calm the others. The noise began to subside.

"Don't anyone move," Sean ordered, his voice still strong, but no longer harsh. "Shut him up," he added, referring to a boy two rows behind him who was screaming hysterically. The girl next to him slapped his face hard, three times. The boy continued

to snivel, but the screaming was over.

"Zach, get out of my way," said Sean softly.

Zach turned sideways in his seat.

"Now listen," said Sean, moving very cautiously into the aisle that extended down the side of the hoverbus. "If no one does anything stupid, there's a chance we can all get out of this alive. For starters, that means not moving any more than necessary, until we figure out just how much the bus and the bridge will take."

He had to speak loudly to be heard above the waterfall. But at least everyone was paying attention now.

"We don't have a lot of time to waste," he added, not saying out loud what everyone already knew—that there would probably be an aftershock. "So let's use what we've got wisely."

He pointed to a dark-haired girl in the first row. "Marie—moving slowly, take a look at Mr. Oblitt."

The girl leaned around the driver's seat. "He's breathing," she said. "But he's out cold."

Sean nodded. "All right—then things are up to us. And getting him off safely is going to be one

of our jobs. Everyone hold still. I'm going to see if I can get the front of the bus open."

... *without dumping us into the gorge,* he added silently, hoping he could get through this without making the wrong move.

He took a step forward. The bus tipped—ever so slightly—and then held steady. He gave the others credit. Everyone flinched, and several of them let out sharp gasps. But no one lost it.

He took another step. The bus held solid and didn't move again at all until he made it to the front, when it shifted just a few centimeters.

From his new vantage point Sean could see part of what had happened. The quake had pulled the east side of the bridge—their destination—sideways and up. The combination of that motion and the snapping of one pole had created a kind of curl into which the bus had settled. It wasn't exactly secure; if the vehicle moved too far in either direction it would tumble out and down. But the situation wasn't quite as fragile as he had feared.

He snapped on the bus-to-bus communication system. "This is Sean Matthews," he said, speaking into the hand-held mike. "Can you read me?"

"I copy you, Sean," said a familiar voice.

"Katya! Thank goodness it's you." One of the early members of the settlement team, Dr. Kovitch had become a good friend of the Matthews family. "What does the situation look like from out there?"

"Not good, but not impossible. Where's Oblitt?"

"Out cold. Victim of panic—not his own."

Dr. Kovitch cursed. "Can you get at your supplies?" she asked.

"I doubt it. I'd have to get around to the side of the bus to get at the storage area."

"Figures. Okay, listen. We've got lots of rope. I'm going to have someone work their way out to you with it."

"Negative," said Sean. "I don't think we should put any more strain on the bridge than we have to." He looked out the front window. "The tilt of the bridge isn't that bad. If everyone holds on to the edge they can move along it with no problem. I'll stay here with Mr. Oblitt. If he's not awake by the time everyone else is off the bridge, I'll come halfway, and you can toss me some rope."

Kovitch hesitated. "It's your butt," she said at last.

"I know," said Sean.

He turned around. The others were looking at him, faces serious, eyes wide and worried. He felt a little sick. Why had he decided this was his job? What if everything fell apart? He swallowed. It didn't really make any difference how he felt. He had to go through with this.

"Everyone listen up. I'm going to try to open the front of the bus. Once it's up, we head out one at a time. Wait for me to call you. Once you're out, hold on to the edge of the bridge and you

shouldn't have any trouble getting across." He glanced out the window again. "Be careful. The spray from the falls reaches this far, so it may be a little slippery. Hold on tight."

He reached past Mr. Oblitt's shoulder and put his finger on the button that operated the front of the bus. He hesitated, wishing he could adjust the speed, make the door open slowly. He thought about doing it in several steps, but decided the on-and-off action might cause unnecessary motion.

Taking a deep breath, he pressed the button.

Arkady stood between Clea and Dr. Kovitch. He held his breath as the front of the bus on the bridge began to open.

It was excruciating to watch. The bus was tilted away from them, back toward the western edge of the gorge. The slight twist in the flexite surface had kept the bus from sliding over the edge of the bridge and into the gorge. But the holding effect was tenuous at best. It would take very little to send the bus—and everyone on it-slipping sideways into the chasm.

The front of the bus lifted up ten centimeters, twenty, then thirty.

Stop, thought Arkady. *That's enough. Don't push it any more than you have to.*

As if whoever was opening the door had heard him, the motion stopped. A head appeared in the opening, and a girl wearing a blue boorman crawled out of the bus. She started to stand, then

thought better of it. Lying down on her stomach, she gripped the upper edge of the twisted bridge. It was only a few centimeters thick. Taking a deep breath, she began to work her way across the gorge.

Another girl appeared, and then a boy. Soon there were seven people working their way across the bridge.

Arkady could feel the ripple of tension in his group as the bus suddenly slipped sideways again. When it stopped and held, it seemed as though they all relaxed together.

They waited, but no one else appeared.

Zach had watched Sean take charge of the situation in the bus with a combination of surprise and admiration. If this was one of his daydreams, he would be the one directing the escape operation now. Instead he was sitting here, waiting for his turn to get out.

The wait was agonizing. Each person who crawled through the door had the potential to shift the bus enough to send the rest of them to their doom. It was all he could do to stay in his seat. It wasn't so much that he wanted to get out ahead of the others as that he wanted to move for them; he couldn't stand the fact that his life depended on someone else not being too clumsy.

He had a feeling Sean was going to save him for last. *That's what you get for being the hero's buddy,* he thought. He closed his eyes, wonder-

ing if that would make the waiting easier. It didn't.

When he opened his eyes again he realized that something had gone wrong.

"I can't," said the boy who was now crouching at the edge of the door. "I can't do it."

"You have to," said Sean gently.

The boy shook his head. Zach could see that he was trembling.

Sean looked desperate. "The others are waiting," he said. "We don't have time to spare."

"I'm sorry," said the boy. "I can't do it."

Zach could see tears running down the boy's cheeks. He was trying to figure out some way to help when Philippa spoke up. "I'll go with him."

Zach blinked in astonishment. *Philippa?*

Sean hesitated. "All right," he said after a moment. "Madden, Philippa is going to go with you. Can you make it if there's someone with you?"

The boy, Madden, nodded his head. "I think so," he said softly.

Philippa made her way to the front of the bus. Zach realized she was taking an awful chance. If Madden panicked, did something stupid, he could easily take her over the edge with him.

He heard Sean whispering to Philippa. She nodded her head and crawled past Madden. Zach flinched as their combined weight caused the bus to shift again. He could sense everyone around him holding their breath, as if they were all trying to will the bus into keeping its position.

The bus held. Zach let out his breath. He didn't care whether the explanation had to do with will power, physics, or dumb luck. He'd go for anything that worked right now.

The rest of the evacuation went smoothly. Before long the only ones left were Sean, the still-unconscious Oblitt, and himself.

Sean turned to Zach. "I'm going to need your help," he said.

Zach nodded. He had been expecting this. He made his way to the front of the bus.

Sean was bending over Mr. Oblitt.

"Mr. Oblitt," he said softly."Marc. Can you hear me?"

The only response was a groan.

"What do you think?" said Sean."Can we handle him?"

"I'd feel better if we had a rope," said Zach.

"I'd feel better if we had wings," replied Sean.

"Try again," said Zach.

Sean shook Oblitt gently. The teacher groaned and rolled his head back. "Where am I?" he asked.

"On the bus," said Sean. "Listen, Zach and I are going to try to get you out of here. Can you help?"

"Dunno."

Sean looked at Zach. "This isn't gonna be easy," he said.

Zach shrugged. "Maybe we can talk him out of a few weeks of homework."

Sean ignored the wisecrack. "Come on. Let's get going before the aftershock hits."

"You got it, partner." Zach positioned himself behind Mr. Oblitt. Working together, the boys managed to lift the man out of his seat. Sean crouched at the opening, trying to figure out what to do next.

"Give me your belt," he said at last.

Zach did as he was asked. Sean slipped the belt off his own boorman and buckled the two together. He slipped the loop over Mr. Oblitt's shoulders and then pulled the man's

arms through it. Next he crawled under the edge of the door.

pi "Okay, push," he said, reaching back in and

grabbing the belts.

Zach braced himself against the driver's seat and helped guide Mr. Oblitt's body out through the opening.

He felt the bus begin to shift.

"Have you got him?" he cried.

"Yes! Get out!" yelled Sean.

Zach scrambled for the door. The bus was sliding faster. He knew it was going to go. Slipping his head under the opening, he wrapped his arms around Mr. Oblitt's body and prayed that Sean had a good grip on the edge of the bridge.

He howled in pain as the door scraped over his legs. Staring in horror, his heart pounding at the thought of how narrowly he had escaped the deathtrap, he watched the bus pivot sideways. It

stopped at the edge of the bridge for just a moment, teetering hesitantly.

Sean shouted a warning. The weight of the bus was pulling at the bridge, causing it to tip further sideways.

Zach tightened his grip on Oblitt's legs. Suddenly, as if it had made up its mind to stop fighting gravity, the bus slipped over the edge and disappeared into the gorge.

Zach watched the first few moments of the fall. Then he closed his eyes.

When the bus landed, he could barely hear the crash above the roar of the falls.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Sean and Zach

Sean had his left arm hooked over the upper edge of the twisted bridge. His left side was pressed against the slick, wet flexite that led like a slide to the chasm below. He trembled with the effort of holding the belt that was the only thing keeping Zach and Mr. Oblitt from slipping into that chasm. His body felt like it was being ripped in two.

The surface of the bridge was slicker than he had expected; the spray from the falls, though not heavy, was constant, and the flexite was completely covered with water.

Tightening his grip on the belt, he looked past Zach to where the bus had vanished into the gorge. "Are you all right?" he called, yelling to be heard above the roar of the falling water.

"I think so," replied Zach. "My legs are kind of banged up. But at least I'm not in the bus."

"Not a good place to be right now," agreed Sean. "Can you make it up to the edge of the bridge?"

"I don't know. Let's see what happens."

Using one hand to keep his grip on Mr. Oblitt, Zach placed the other hand against the surface of the bridge and tried to pull himself upward. "Not a chance," he groaned. "This thing is slicker than a Vespen mudwallow."

"Give me a minute!" yelled Sean. Keeping one hand clamped around the belt that held Mr. Oblitt, he worked his arm over the edge of the bridge. "Okay," he called. "I've got a better grip. Pull yourself up along Mr. Oblitt's body."

Zach inched his way upward, hoping Mr. Oblitt wouldn't suddenly lift his arms and slip out of the makeshift harness by which Sean was supporting him. When he could reach Sean's arm, which was rigid with the effort of supporting the three of them, he used it as a brace to swing his body sideways. On the third try he managed to link his foot over the side of the bridge. After that it was a relatively simple matter to pull himself level with Sean. Reaching down, he took hold of the harness to relieve his friend of some of the burden.

They hung there for a moment, each of them with one arm linked over the edge of the bridge, Oblitt's body dangling between them. Zach pulled himself up to peer over the edge of the bridge, and wished he hadn't. When he looked toward his feet, the stretch of bridge seemed to separate him from the abyss below. But from this

angle *it* was a straight drop to the river that frothed and spumed around the rocks so far below. He turned and looked straight out in the other direction. The awesome waterfall seemed to fill his view. His boorman was already soaked with its spray.

"Let's get going," said Sean. "I don't want to be hanging around out here if there's an aftershock!"

Zach nodded. Tightening his grip on the bridge, he leaned his face against his shoulder and tried to wipe away some of the spray. "Let's go," he said.

After a few tries they developed a system: Sean would inch backward along the bridge, pulling Mr. Oblitt with him, while Zach moved forward, pushing on the teacher's body with his legs. Once they had the rhythm, they were able to move along fairly rapidly.

They did pretty well that way until Mr. Oblitt woke up.

Arkady Davidov had been standing at the edge of the gorge, helping people climb onto the bank once they had crossed the bridge. Now everyone except Zach, Sean, and Mr. Oblitt had made it over. He turned to watch the two boys as they struggled with the unconscious man. After a moment he tapped Dr. Kovitch on the shoulder and said, "We

need a rope."

Kovitch turned, irritated at being distracted

from the drama on the bridge. "What did you say?"

"We need a rope," repeated Arkady. "In case they have trouble with Mr. Oblitt. If I take some rope out to them, we will have a backup system in case they lose their grip."

The dark-haired professor considered Arkady's proposal for a few seconds. "No," she said. "I don't want you going out there. We've got three at risk already. No sense in taking a chance on losing anyone else."

Arkady frowned. "What if there is an aftershock?" he asked. "If things start shaking, I doubt they will be able to hold onto the bridge and Mr. Oblitt at the same time. Or what if we lose the bridge altogether?"

Kovitch closed her eyes. "We'll *toss* them some rope," she said.

Glancing over her shoulder to make sure nothing had gone wrong during their brief conversation, she led Arkady back to the bus. They dug a coil of rope out of the storage area and returned to the edge of the gorge. "They're in trouble!" said a girl. "Damn," said Dr. Kovitch weakly. "We should have moved faster." Arkady at her heels, she hurried back to the bridge.

But everything appeared as it had when she left.

"Who said trouble?" she asked harshly. Arkady was surprised to see Clea step forward.

"I did," she said. "Please believe me. They're in trouble. / *can tell."*

A cry from the bridge drew everyone's attention. Dr. Kovitch cursed again. "Arkady," she said, "throw them the rope." "I can't," he said flatly, handing the rope to her. "My reflexes still haven't adjusted to this gravity. I would miss. You do it."

"Hold still, Mr. Oblitt!" shouted Sean desperately.

He knew he couldn't blame the teacher. If he had opened his eyes to find himself stretched out on a slick bridge tilting down to a hundred meter drop, he would have reacted, too. But the man's startled movement had nearly pulled the linked belts out of Sean's hand. And holding onto the belts had nearly broken his grip on the edge of the bridge. He pulled himself back up.

"You okay?" yelled Zach.

Sean nodded. "How about you?"

Zach's long brown hair, completely soaked by the spray from the falls, was plastered against his neck and forehead. "I've been better," he said. "But I'm still here."

"Mr. Oblitt?"

The only answer was a groan.

"What do you think," yelled Zach. "Would it work better if we pulled him up here, held him by the arms?"

Sean shook his head. "I think we'd have less control," he shouted back. He didn't add that he was afraid to put any more strain on the make-

shift harness than necessary. He had a stomach-churning fear that if they pulled too hard, Mr. Oblitt's arms would lift and let the belts slide over his head. Or, just as bad, they might catch under his chin and strangle him.

He had no idea what they were going to do when they got to the edge of the bridge.

As it turned out, Mr. Oblitt had ideas of his own.

"Pull me up," he called after they had traveled another meter or so. "Pull me up."

Zach looked at Sean. Sean nodded. If Oblitt panicked and started to struggle it could be fatal for all of them. Better to pull him up to the edge of the bridge. "Hold tight, sir," he yelled. "Keep your arms clamped down."

Working in unison, they tugged on the belts.

"Damn," said Zach. "Now what do we do?"

They had pulled the teacher as far as they could with the belts. Sean hesitated. "Tighten your grip," he said. "I'm going to let go of the belts and try to get my hand under his arm."

Zach nodded. Glancing past Sean, he spotted something at the edge of the gorge. "Wait a sec," he said suddenly. "New development!"

Will Mornette watched Dr. Kovitch working with the rope until he couldn't stand it anymore. "Not like that," he said, pushing his way past several kids to where the woman was trying to put a loop in the end of the rope. "You'll strangle them." Without waiting" for permission, he took the

rope out of her hands. His long, nimble fingers moved in intricate patterns as he quickly created five loops at the end of the rope. "Three for Oblitt, one for Sean, one for Zach," he said, handing the rope back to Dr. Kovitch. "We'll have to count on them to figure out how to use it."

She took the coil of rope, stepped to the edge of the gorge, and flung it forward. The trio on the bridge was perhaps twenty-five meters away. The harness fell about two meters short, slid along the slanting surface, and dropped into the gorge.

Cursing, Dr. Kovitch pulled the rope back in, coiling it as it came.

Will watched her, his hands twitching as if he was dying to get hold of the rope again himself. But when she offered it to him he shook his head dismally. "You do it," he said. "I don't think I can throw it that far."

He watched her turn and fling the rope out toward the boys. A cheer went up as the

harness landed between them.

"Well done, Dr. Kovitch," said Will. "Now hadn't we better get that braced around something?"

She handed the rope to Will. He was heading for a tree about five meters back from the edge of the cliff when the aftershock knocked him to the ground.

"What are we supposed to do with this?" asked

Sean, when the harness came flying over his shoulder.

"Support system," shouted Zach. "Get a loop around each of us. Then if the bridge goes, we've still got something to hold onto. The extra loops are for his legs—to keep him from sliding through if he's not aware enough to hold on."

Sean nodded. "I'll hold him," he yelled, tightening his grip on the belts. "You try to get him into this."

"Be careful," muttered Mr. Oblitt.

Zach slipped the last loop on the rope around his own waist before he let go of the edge of the bridge. Holding on to Mr. Oblitt's boorman, he lowered himself along the slope, then began working the large central loop over the teacher's legs. He was glad Mr. Oblitt was aware enough to help; otherwise it would have been twice as hard. He had just slipped one of the smaller loops over Oblitt's right foot when the bridge began to vibrate.

"Hold on!" yelled Sean. "Here we go!"

The aftershock knocked Philippa off her feet.

We've lost theml was her first thought as she hit the ground. *They're gone.*

Then her brain began to process what she had seen, what had happened too fast for her to comprehend at first. Arkady had been standing next to the rope. When the tremor hit he dove for it, wrapping it around his arm as he went down.

Ignoring the rumbling earth, she forced herself to her knees.

Arkady was just a few feet away. He was on his knees too, leaning back away from the cliff. His face was red with effort. The muscles in his arms were bulging; the veins in his neck stood out as if they were going to burst.

But he had them.

He had them!

This is it, thought Sean as he saw the bridge split across the center.

They started to fall. The bridge, three meters wide and only a few centimeters thick didn't fall straight down. Instead, caught by the air, it flapped and fluttered like a long streamer of paper.

Sean's reflexes took over. Wrapping one arm around the rope that ran past his shoulder,

he rode the bridge down like it was a dying kite. They hit the side of the cliff hard enough to knock the breath out of him—but not hard enough to break his grip on the rope.

He looked down. Marc Oblitt's body—half in and half out of the harness—hung sideways from the rope. His head was about an arm's length beneath Sean's feet.

Beyond Oblitt he could see Zach, clinging to the rope with both hands. He was supported by the loop. He had his eyes closed.

Beneath Zach, Sean could see the end of the bridge, then the great drop to the bottom of the

gorge. He raised his eyes, and saw the other half of the bridge. It hung down the face of the opposite cliff like a long gray banner.

The thunder of the waterfall filled his ears. He closed his eyes and tightened his hold on the rope. / *wish I had had time to get one of the loops around my own waist,* he thought, leaning his head back against the slick gray surface of the bridge. Then, to his astonishment, he felt himself sliding upward.

Will Mornette watched in admiration as Arkady began to back up. How he wished he had even half that strength!

As soon as there was room between Arkady and the edge of the cliff, others rushed in to help. Step by step they moved back.

A moment later Sean Matthews appeared at the edge of the cliff.

Eager hands reached out to help him over. Soon Mr. Oblitt appeared, then Zach Yamoto, who astonished everyone by kneeling down and kissing the ground three times.

"I knew I should have stayed home," he said, staggering to his feet.

CHAPTER EIGHT:

Pesky Theskies

With one bus lost, the kids had to take turns walking and riding. Clea didn't mind the walking; in some ways it was really more fun than riding. But the unexpected arrival of a pack of theskies just as it was beginning to get dark nearly scared her into a coma.

She was walking briskly near the front of the group when the beasts arrived. She might not have been so startled, had she not been busy replaying the day's events in her mind. She found herself torn between irritation and awe at the way Philippa had managed to play up to both Sean and Arkady after their heroic actions at the bridge.

Her thoughts were interrupted by a rustling in the bushes beside her. She turned and saw

a long-necked creature dart into the roadway. "Gack!" it said, falling into step beside her.

Clea shrieked and jumped aside.

"Gack!" cried the creature in alarm; it jumped back into the bushes.

Clea heard a familiar laugh beside her. "Don't worry," said Zach. "It's just a theskie."

"Theskie!" cried a raucous voice in the bushes. Several other voices picked up the cry. "Theskie! Theskie! Theskie!"

"Sounds like a whole pack of them," said Zach. "They're incredible mimics."

"Ick!" said a voice in the bushes.

"Are you sure they're not dangerous?" asked Clea. Since her arrival, she had seen several of the creatures poking around the edges of Ambora. But she had figured those were domesticated in some way. These were *wild* theskies.

"Hasn't been a case of a theskie attacking a human in all the time people have been here," said Zach. "Annoying them, yes. But none of them have ever harmed anyone."

As if on cue, a theskie poked its head out of the bushes ahead of them.

"Ackle ackle ackle," it said, sounding cranky.

"Watch," said Zach. He held out his hands in front of him and walked slowly toward the theskie. It watched him carefully, its amber eyes following his every moment. When he was close enough, Zach put his hand on the theskie's head, which was at about waist height. The creature hesitated for a moment, then pushed up with its head. It made a kind of chuckling sound in the middle of its long neck.

"Don't encourage them, Zach," said Dr. Kovitch, who was walking beside them. "We'll have theskies everywhere."

"We will anyway," said Zach. "Unless you want to scare them away."

Dr. Kovitch looked serious. "I don't think you can scare them away without hurting one of them. And you know how the Planetary league feels about *that."*

Zach nodded. A handful of ecological disasters in the early years of the Planetary Settlement Program had prompted severe penalties for bringing unnecessary harm to native creatures.

"I agree with those laws," said Clea stoutly.

"So do I," said Dr. Kovitch. "But sometimes I think the League gets a little carried away in the enforcement. I feel nervous if I swat a bug these days. And if we don't figure out some way to keep these beasties in line we're going to have big problems. Here, look at this."

Four or five theskies were walking beside them now. Dr. Kovitch put her arm around the neck of the one nearest to them, which promptly adjusted its gait so that it was walking

right beside her. She stopped and lifted its left front leg.

Clea bent over to examine the theskie's foot. It was shaped something like a human hand, with three long fingers that ended in rather ferocious-looking claws.

Dr. Kovitch pointed to the inmost finger. "An opposable thumb," she said. "These hands can

grasp and turn and manipulate almost as well as a human's. If one of these animals ever manages to get inside our buildings—and I predict that's going to happen before too much time goes by-just think of the mischief it could cause, playing with switches and levers."

Clea noticed that despite her ominous words, Dr. Kovitch was stroking the theskie's neck.

"I'll tell you right now—dealing with theskies is something the human race is going to have to give a lot more thought to if we really want to settle Gauguin."

The theskies were still tagging along when Mr. Oblitt and Dr. Kovitch decided it was time to make camp for the night.

Mr. Oblitt, who was still feeling too shaky to walk, had driven the remaining hoverbus throughout the afternoon. He had called ahead to tell the observatory not to expect the group until the following morning. He had also given them a brief report regarding the incident on the bridge. In turn the observatory had contacted the colony officials back in Ambora, who had promised to send additional supplies—and a replacement stock of Fault Finders—by air.

Clea had changed into a brown boorman with long sleeves and long legs. When she came out of her tent, she found a spot near the campfire and watched as Dr. Kovitch pushed a fresh log into the flames. She huddled closer. The fire provided

just enough heat to counteract the slight chill that had come with nightfall.

Some trace elements in the wood gave the flames a green tint. A pair of theskies stood nearby, clucking softly to themselves. The night was filled with rich, musky smells. Clea saw Sean and Mr. Oblitt stringing an electronic barrier around the perimeter of the campsite. At least she would be able to sleep without worrying about wandering wildlife. She sighed contentedly and leaned back to look up at the two moons.

"Justine and Juliette," said Arkady, who was sitting on a log nearby. "Pretty, aren't they?"

Clea nodded. Juliette, the larger of Gauguin's two moons, had risen first. It was nearly full, and the light it reflected from the blue sun seemed to fill the night with silver. The waxing crescent of Justine was just starting to show over the tops of the trees. It would remain in the sky long after Juliette had disappeared.

Dr. Kovitch poked the fire again and turned to Arkady. "I've been meaning to ask you why you wouldn't throw the rope for me this afternoon," she said.

Arkady shrugged. "I would have missed."

"I don't understand," said Clea, tucking her feet beneath her. "You're so strong, why would throwing a rope be a problem?"

Arkady looked embarrassed. "I am very clumsy here," he said after a moment. "Nothing weighs what it should, and my body still hasn't learned how to deal with it."

"At least you're *over* capable," said Will mournfully. "I've got the opposite problem. I can hardly move here!"

"Where are you from?" asked Zach.

"Acedium. It's one of the dome worlds." He looked up at the wide, starry sky and shivered. "We never went outside there. It was too dangerous."

"Will would be much happier if his father had never met my mother," said a small, dark-haired boy sitting at the edge of the circle.

"Shut up, Paul," said Will. His voice was weary, as if he were extremely tired, though whether he was tired of life in general or just his stepbrother was hard to say.

"Will hates me," Paul continued cheerfully.

I'm not sure I blame him, thought Clea.

"You look kind of young to be in the Third Cohort," said Zach.

"I'm fourteen," said Paul defensively.

"Yeah, and he finished all the Third Cohort curriculum two years ago," said Will. "They just don't know what else to do with him."

"Shut up," said Paul.

This is getting unpleasant, thought Clea, wishing she could sidetrack the conversation. She started to hum to herself, hoping a song would divert them. She could have hugged Zach when he joined in. She was even more delighted when he started to sing the words. He had a wonderful voice! It was a little high, but very pure and clear.

She matched her voice to his and they took off,

playing with the song, stretching it to see what they could do. The theskies stirred in their sleep. The fire crackled. Clea and Zach reached the end of the song, looked at each other, and broke out laughing.

They went through a few more songs, then someone started telling a story about his sister getting stuck in a swamp on Tieff. Pretty soon everyone was swapping tales about their old homes. Clea found it sweet, but a little sad. She realized this was the group's only real bond: they were all homesick together.

The fire began to die down. Mr. Oblitt and Dr. Kovitch announced it was time for everyone to head for their tents. Despite some grumbling, it didn't take long for people

to follow their advice.

What a day, thought Clea, as she crawled into the tent she was sharing with Yadira Odetts. Within minutes Yadira was snoring—a soft, gentle sound Clea found almost comforting. She laid back and closed her eyes. She was just drifting of when she received the first message.

Her eyes flew open. She sat up and turned toward Yadira. "Did you—"

But the other girl was still snoring, her breath deep and. regular. Puzzled, and not a little frightened, Clea lay back down.

She was nearly asleep before it happened again—as if it couldn't come when her conscious mind was in control.

The message came not in words, but some strange combination of images and feelings.

Although she had no sense of physical danger, Clea began to tremble. It was the strangeness of it that terrified her.

Not that what she was experiencing was very clear. She was receiving a *sense* of something-something ancient, something beautiful, and something that ended in great tragedy.

And beyond all that, one other thing—an urgent need, almost a command. It came to her as a feeling. But if she had been forced to express it in words, she would have translated it as: *Please come. Someone must know. Someone must bear witness.*

CHAPTER NINE:

Drill Teams

"Up, up, up! The sun is shining. It's a beautiful day. We have to get busy because the world is falling to pieces."

Zach groaned. Dr. Kovitch was entirely too cheerful for this time of day—whatever time it was. The tent flap rattled again. "Come on," she yelled, "let's get moving!"

Zach opened his eyes. Sean was just closing the neck of his long-sleeved boorman.

"Ah, the great skate awakes!" said Sean, shaking his shoulders to stretch the light green fabric. "Come on, hero. Our public is waiting."

"Don't we get a day off after yesterday?" grumbled Zach. He rolled over and pulled the edge of his sleeping bag over his head.

"This is earthquake weather," replied Sean. "Take a day off now and we may not be here tomorrow."

Zach sighed and pulled down the covers. "All right," he said. "Never let it be said that when duty called, Zachary P. Yamoto failed to answer."

"That's good," said Sean. "Because you've got five minutes before I take down the tent."

"Your generosity overwhelms me," said Zach. But there was no one to hear him. Sean had already left the tent.

Zach grabbed a short-sleeved boorman, one of several items that had been loaned to him by the kids on the bus that had escaped the gorge.

"I've got to speak to Sean about that," he muttered, as he slipped into the one-piece outfit. "Next time he's going to play hero, he ought to remember to rescue our clothes, too."

Fastening the boorman, he stepped through the front of the tent, let out a howl, and dove back in.

It was cold out there!

Three minutes later he tried again. This time he was wearing a long-sleeved, dark brown boorman.

Sean was standing at the corner of the tent, holding a metal instrument about the size of baby's forearm. "You're just in time!" he said with a wicked grin. "I was about to start rolling up the tent."

"Were not," said Zach. "Your pack's still inside."

Sean laughed. "Very good! I figured it would be two or three hours before you were awake

enough to figure that out. You impress me."

"No talk," said Zach, running his hand through his hair. "Boy hungry. Feed boy. Boy eat. Then boy talk."

Clea smiled. "Come here, boy," she called. "Food."

Zach wandered over to watch her open packages. "This not food," he grumbled. "No chocolate."

"Shut up and eat," said Clea.

He didn't have to be told twice.

It was mid-morning when they hiked up the road to the observatory. They were greeted by two scientists—Dr. Cardell, a slender, gray-haired man, and Dr. Stemple, a tall, bearded man who reminded Sean of the king in a picture book he had loved when he was little. The two men wasted very little time in gathering everyone together in front of the small building.

"The replacement supplies arrived about an hour ago," said Dr. StempJe. "I would like

for us to be on the road within the next hour."

Sean tried to concentrate on what Dr. Stemple was saying, but he was distracted by the winged creature perched on the scientist's shoulder. It was not a bird, for it had no feathers; other than blinking and yawning, it didn't seem to move at all.

Dr. Cardell stepped forward, holding a Fault Finder in each hand. "You'll be using laser drills to plant these," he said. "Not for the sake of

ease—they're a little too dangerous to use just to save you some hard work—but for precision. In order for us to get the greatest anti-seismic effect, we have to make sure each Fault Finder is planted at a precise depth and angle in relation to the Lowentrout Fault. Marc, would you give a demonstration please?"

Sean watched carefully as Mr. Oblitt explained how to calibrate the laser drills. The procedure was fairly complex, requiring the operator to lock in several different measurements. The drill itself consisted of a triangular base from which three long arms led up to the smaller platform where the laser was centered.

When he was finished, Mr. Oblitt stepped away from the drill. Making sure no one else was nearby, he tapped a code into the remote-control device, A bolt of amplified light extended from the top of the tripod to the soil. Suddenly the air was filled with an intense burning smell.

"The Fault Finders are meant to function as a network," said Dr. Cardell. "Individually, they will not have that much impact. We need the entire network to ease the pressure causing the quakes and tremors. So it's important that we get all of them in place as soon as possible. Katya, will you cover positioning?"

Dr. Kovitch stepped forward. She held a sheaf of papers in her hand. "Each team will receive a packet of maps and photographs," she said. "Using high-resolution lenses—and, in some cases, X-ray technology—our satellite system has

provided clear images of each place where a Fault Finder is to be planted. Here are some samples."

She handed around some electronic imaging sheets. Sean was impressed. The picture he received showed a close-up view of a patch of ground that couldn't have been more than two meters square. The details were so clear he could count the leaves on the plants. A red circle marked the precise spot where the Fault Finder was to be planted. On the back of the sheet was a listing of the coordinates, including depth and angle.

"We've made triple sets of these information packets," said Dr. Kovitch. "Make sure that you split them up among you. That way if something should happen to one or even two sets, you'll still have a backup."

She hesitated. "We're also going to be passing out trank guns. Let me remind you that because we still don't know the biology of Gauguin that well, there is a possibility the tranquilizer might have a toxic effect on some animals. You know the legal

repercussions of killing a native life form as well as I do; even if it's accidental, the resulting paper work can keep you busy for years. And the stigma can last even longer. So use these only in case of extreme emergency. They should be safe. But there's no guarantee."

"We'll provide three trank guns per team. We'll have four teams with ten members each. I'll

head one team. Marc Oblitt, Dr. Stemple and Dr. Cardell will lead the others."

Clea held her breath while Dr. Kovitch called out the teams. She hoped she would end up in a group with some of her friends—or at least someone she knew.

By the time they were halfway through the names, she had decided she wanted to be part of Dr. Kovitch's team. For one thing, she had a good feeling about the slender, dark-haired woman with the big nose. For another, the team had two of her favorite people: Sean and Zach.

In fact, she decided, the only real toroid in the group was that skinny Will Mornette. He had made the harness, and he might be perfectly decent, but he was so weak and uncoordinated that out here he was almost a liability.

Dr. Kovitch continued to call off names. Clea began to get nervous. When all but six people had been called she began to wonder if it was possible they had somehow forgotten her altogether. Was she so new on Gauguin that her name had been left off the lists?

She blinked. Dr. Kovitch *was* calling her name! She had been so busy daydreaming she had nearly missed it.

At least she was on the team she wanted. Blushing furiously, Clea hurried across the clearing to stand next to a quiet, intense-looking boy named Elken. Trying not to be too obvious, she looked around her. In addition to Sean, Zach, and Will she had met three of the others: Yadira,

Arkady, and Philippa. The remaining two kids—a girl named Cybill and a handsome, slender boy named Peter—were strangers to her.

This could be interesting, thought Zach, as he watched Sean and Arkady position themselves on either side of Philippa. *I wonder if anyone is interested in taking bets on how it will all work out.*

With Dr. Kovitch in the lead, the group had just set out on an eastward path from the observatory. Arkady was carrying most of the Fault Finders. He had hoisted the bundle over his shoulder as easily as if they were made of the light, hollow branches of a nockwood tree.

Zach decided to drop back and walk beside Clea. She smiled at him when he fell into step beside her.

They walked in silence for a while. "I liked singing with you last night," he said at last.

"It was fun," she agreed. "You have a nice voice."

He was trying to think of what to say next when a pair of theskies poked their heads in between them. "Gack!" said the larger of the two, nudging Zach with its head."Gack!"

He laughed and scratched it under the chin. "I think these are the ones who were hanging around inside the camp last night," he said, pushing the creature's snout away.

"How can you tell them apart?" asked Clea.

"Look here," said Zach. "See the variations in

the bars across the back of their necks? Now look at their eyes. Also, once you get used to them you'll begin to hear a difference in their voices."

"Oy!" said the smaller theskie.

Clea stroked its neck, enjoying the smooth.soft feel of its scales. Something fluttered overhead. Looking up, she spotted a small, speckled creature, about the size of a theskie's foot, flying from branch to branch in a nearby tree.

"What's that?" she asked.

Zach shrugged. "The bio team may have catalogued it by now, but I haven't begun to learn the names of all the critters you can find in this corner of Gauguin. The theskies and the quufers are so common in town it sometimes seems like that's all the wildlife there is. But there's thousands of different species crawling around out here."

The idea made Clea nervous. She stared at the foliage beside her as if she were wondering what kind of awful things might be lurking there.

Zach laughed. "Do you have a quufer yet?" he asked.

She shook her head. "Should 1?"

"Well it's not a matter of should. It's just that most people do sooner or later. According to Sean, the things are so cute and friendly that the minute the bio team gave the okay, people started adopting them in droves. I've lost track of how many we have in our house. It helps make up for the pets we had to leave behind."

Clea nodded. "I never thought it made sense to

say it was okay for human beings to come to a planet, but that we couldn't bring along our pets! Biological invasion is biological invasion."

"Every additional organism carries at least a hundred complications for the ecosystem," said Zach, quoting the biologists' favorite warning. "Even so, I miss my cat."

"Come on, you two," called Dr. Kovitch. "We've got work to do!"

"Uh-oh," said Zach. "You'd better watch it. Spend too much time talking to me and people will start to think you're a skate, too."

"You're no skate," said Clea.

"Shhhh!" hissed Zach, rolling his eyes comically. "What do you want to do? Ruin my reputation?"

CHAPTER TEN:

When the Rocks Roll

Philippa had wondered why the scientists set them up in teams of ten. By the time they finished drilling their first hole, she had her answer: getting all the measurements and angles correct was an incredibly complicated process.

First they had to find the general area, then the exact spot—a process which involved staring at the maps and electronic imaging sheets for several minutes, then trying to match the images with the physical location they *thought* was right. This seemed to call for everyone running around and trying to find specific rocks and plants, counting leaves, and arguing about what might have happened in the two or three days since the images had been made.

"Sure this plant is a leaf short," she heard Zach say several times. "Things do get eaten, you know."

When everybody finally agreed that they had exactly the right location—and Dr. Kovitcfy insisted that *everyone* agree—they would set up for the actual drilling. Tempers sometimes grew short as they discovered that what had looked merely difficult when Doctors Cardell and Stemple were explaining it was nearly impossible in real life.

Things were complicated by the fact that since Gauguin had a weak magnetic field, they had to base their measurements on the gravitational field. The instruments were sensitive —"cranky" was the way Zach put it—and more than once they had a triangulation all set up when suddenly someone would call, "Whoops, that's not it. Better start again."

I'm glad Dr. Kovitch is a patient woman, thought Philippa. *This is not a job for people with short fuses.*

The worst situation came in a spot that had been badly affected by the previous day's quake. After an hour of trying to figure out what went where, Dr. Kovitch threw up her hands and cried, "This one we do by guesswork!"

When they were done drilling the hole and planting the Fault Finder, Philippa slipped on her backpack and looked around for someone to walk to the next location with—preferably Arkady or Sean,

The nearest person was Clea.

Philippa hesitated. It would be nice to make friends with one of the other girls. But that

had

never worked for her before. Besides, she was pretty sure Clea was interested in Sean. She was still trying to decide whether or not she wanted him herself, and she wasn't about to pass him on to the next in line until she made up her mind. Arkady solved the problem by appearing quietly beside her.

Clea paused and wiped her brow. It was late afternoon, and they had planted all but three of their Fault Finders. She didn't want to think about how far they had walked, though Dr. Kovitch said they were getting close to the place where the Catalans met the Cynthians. The terrain was far more rugged than when they had started out that morning, and many of the peaks here soared past the timberline.

"Ackle!" said the theskie walking beside her.

"Oh, shut up!" replied Clea. She was tired and in no mood for commentary from a theskie. She scurried to catch up with Zach, who was walking near the front of the group.

"Greetings, fair Galahadian," he said. Then he began telling a long, complicated story about something that had happened to his family back on Earth.

Sean, Arkady, and Philippa were walking just ahead of Zach and Clea when they entered a narrow pass that led between two steep cliffs. When Clea thought about it later, the only one in the group who didn't fit was Will Mornette. She couldn't figure out how, or why, he happened to

be walking so close to the rest of them— especially since he had been having such a hard time keeping up for most of the day.

"So anyway," continued Zach, "Mom grabbed Lilith under one arm, Tristram under the other, and went running out the door yelling 'You bring that dog back right this instant!'"

Clea was doubling over with laughter when the tremor hit. It wasn't actually that severe; they had already experienced far more powerful quakes. But they were definitely in the wrong spot for this one.

"Look out!" yelled Zach, wrapping an arm around Clea's waist and running forward with her. She saw Will Mornette close behind. His eyes were bulging with terror, and the way his arms and legs were pumping made him look like some strange, rickety puppet.

A crevice was splitting the ground behind Will. It cut straight across the narrow pass, slicing a chasm between the six leaders and the rest of the group.

Huge boulders began bouncing down the cliffs.

"Keep going!" yelled Sean.

They ran, quite literally, for their lives. Survival was as much a matter of not running *into* anything as it was getting out of the way of things. For Clea the most terrifying

moment came when she spotted a falling boulder from the corner of her eye. Without thinking, she pushed Zach to the ground and dropped down beside him.

The boulder sailed over their heads with inches to spare.

Sean held his breath and waited. The problem now was not the quake, but the possibility that some big rock shaken loose by the tremors was still waiting to fall. In their present location even a minor aftershock could be very dangerous.

"Yo!" he called, after a moment. "Everyone okay?"

"Clea and I are alive and breathing over here," yelled Zach.

"I think I'm okay," said Philippa. "It's hard to tell. I'm still shaking."

"I am fine," said Arkady, standing up and brushing himself off.

Sean waited. "Will?" he called.

No answer.

"Has anyone seen Will?"

"He was behind us," said Zach, helping Clea to her feet. He sounded worried.

"I've found him," shouted Arkady. "Someone come—I'll need some help."

All of them came as fast as they could.

To Sean's relief, Will had simply collapsed from exhaustion; the adrenaline-fueled burst of energy that had enabled him to escape from the edge of the fissure had been too much for a body accustomed to Acedium's lower gravity.

Will blinked. He seemed intensely embarrassed when he opened his eyes and saw five concerned faces staring down at him. When he realized Arkady was supporting him with an arm

under his shoulders he tried to get up, only to find that he was weaker than he had expected. "I'll be okay," he whispered. "Just need a minute to recover."

"Take your time," said Sean. "You can rest while I go back and see what's happened to the others. Zach—you want to come with me?"

Zach nodded and followed Sean back down the valley.

Will collapsed back in Arkady's arms. He closed his eyes, wishing that he could be like Sean. It was remarkable the way he could take charge of a situation. How good it must feel to have others look up to you, to be so sure of yourself. He drifted back into unconsciousness, cursing his feeble body, his parents, and gravity.

A few meters away Zach was picking a path over and around the fallen rocks and wondering how he had ended up in the role of the hero's sidekick when he had spent so many daydreams acting the part of the hero. It seemed like whenever something went wrong, Sean just stepped in and handled things. It was great; someone had to do it, and

he did it very well. Only it was something Zach wanted to do himself.

He wondered if Sean figured that since his father was governor he should be a leader, too. Or was it heredity—natural-born leader and all that stuff?

He shook his head in irritation. His ears were ringing. He figured it must be an aftereffect from the roar of the quake. He wished it would stop. It

was annoying—like an insect you couldn't shoo away.

"Ackle, ackle!"

Zach laughed as the two theskies that had been hanging around all day came bouncing out from behind a pile of rocks. "Glad you guys survived the big shake-up," he said.

"Ackle," replied the larger theskie, falling into step beside him.

"Whoa!" said Zach, when they reached the fissure that now divided the valley. "That's one nasty hole!"

The crevice was several meters wide and so deep that he could not see the bottom. Clearly, crossing it was going to be a major problem. But then, they had already faced tougher problems than that and survived!

To the relief of both boys Dr. Kovitch was standing on the other side of the crevice. Yadira, Peter, and Elken stood beside her.

"Where's Cybill?" called Sean. "Is she all right?"

Dr. Kovitch shook her head. "She twisted her ankle pretty seriously. She's in no condition to walk. I've called for a veetol to come get her."

Sean nodded. A vertical-take-off-and-landing plane was the only kind of aircraft that would be of any use here.

"Unfortunately," continued Dr. Kovitch, "it won't be arriving for another three or four hours."

"Why so long?" asked Zach.

"The colony only has a handful, and they're all busy airlifting Fault Finder teams into rougher terrain." She laughed. "You know—the places that aren't as easy to get to as where we are. How's everyone there?"

"I think we're all okay," said Sean. "Will collapsed after everything was all over, but it looks like it was just a combination of nerves and over-exertion."

"Shall I have the bird pick him up?" asked Dr. Kovitch.

"Might be a good idea."

"I don't think so," said Zach. He spoke softly, so that only Sean would hear him. "Will's a pain in the ass to have along. But we're almost done. If you send him back now—well, it just wouldn't be good for him."

Sean hesitated.

"Also, he's the best grav-meter operator in the bunch. Clea's pretty good at it, but without Will, some of the plantings we did today would have taken twice as long."

Sean nodded. "Hold off on that bird for Will," he called across the fissure. "If we're going" to continue the mission, it makes more sense for him to stay with us."

"Who says you're going to continue the mission?" asked Dr. Kovitch sharply.""

"Take it easy, hero," whispered Zach. "We're walking a thin line."

Sean hesitated. "I didn't figure we had any

choice," he said at last. "The geo teams want this all done pronto."

"They also want it done right!" said Dr. Kovitch. "You don't have all the tools, do you?"

"I think we've got everything we need," said Sean."Arkady was carrying the Fault Finders. Clea has a set of the maps and photos. And Zach and I have the drill. We're missing some measurement equipment, but if we make some of the gravmeters do double duty, we can get along."

Dr. Kovitch hesitated. "Are you sure about Will?"

Sean glanced at Zach. "You better know what you're doing, buddy," he muttered.

"Sean, I said are you sure?" Dr. Kovitch looked worried. "I'm still in charge of this crew. If one of you gets mangled, it'll be my head that lands on the chopping block."

Sean kept his doubts on his side of the fissure. "He'll be fine!" he called. "He just needed a little time to recover from that last shake-up."

"All right," she said, "then listen, and listen good..."

"Nice work," said Zach out of the corner of his mouth. "She's gonna let us do it!"

Then, for a moment, he wondered why he had urged Sean to talk Dr. Kovitch into letting them go on.

Actually, the answer was easy—it was an adventure!

CHAPTER ELEVEN:

Spike and Matilda

"Maybe this wasn't such a good idea after all," said Zach, staring at the map in despair. "I am totally lost." He shook his head. If the ringing in his ears would go away, maybe he could concentrate better.

"You're lost because we took a wrong turn about three hundred meters back that way,"

said Will.

Sean looked at him sharply. "Are you sure?" "Here, let me show you." Will took the map from Zach and spread it on the ground so that everyone could see. "Here's where we were walking when the last quake hit," he said, pointing to a spot on the left of the map. "And here's the path we followed up the side of the valley." As he spoke he traced a line across the map with one of his extraordinarily long fingers. "And

then, when we got here, instead of going this way, we went this way."

"If we cut across here, will it take us where we want to go?" asked Sean, pointing to a possible shortcut.

"I wouldn't chance it," said Will. "It looks like there's a deep ravine about here. I think it would be safer to backtrack."

"I agree with Will," said Clea. "It's not that far back to where we made the wrong turn. Why take any more chances?"

"I'm not arguing," said Sean. "I just asked a question. We'll go back that way."

With a collective sigh, the six weary teenagers shouldered their packs and headed down the way they had come, accompanied by the pair of theskies that had joined them earlier in the day. Philippa noticed that the animals seemed to be sticking with them more closely than ever since the quake.

Arkady chose to walk beside Will. "You have some interesting skills," he said casually. "Knots, map-reading. They don't seem like the kind of thing that would be taught in a dome world like Acedium."

Will smiled. "They aren't. My father made me learn them. It's a family tradition."

Arkady lifted an eyebrow, inviting Will to explain why a family would have those kinds of traditions.

Will accepted. "My father's line was mostly Amerindian," he said. "They clung to the old

ways of the twenty-third century long after most of the world had moved on. In fact, Dad can trace his lineage all the way back to the early years of ' the twenty-second century, when they gave the tribes what was left of California. Until a few generations ago, the Whitehorse family stayed pretty much linked in to all that."

"I thought your name was Mornette."

Will smiled. "It is. William *Whitehorse* Mornette. No one was very amused when my father's grandmother married out of the lines."

Arkady nodded. The fact that until recently Will's family had held itself aloof from the great mingling of the races that had occurred over the last five centuries helped explain the unusual reddish cast of the tall boy's skin.

"They were even less amused when my father chose to leave Earth and live on the Alpha

Centauri Moon Base. As far as they were concerned, people who lived in domes were forsaking their heritage. I think my father taught me outdoor skills so he wouldn't feel so guilty about the whole thing." Will sighed. "I didn't mind learning them; it was kind of fun. But I never thought I would have to use them."

He looked up and shuddered. "This all seems so—unprotected," he said, gesturing around them with a sweep of his long, slender arm. "I find it terrifying."

The movement startled a cloud of large insects into the air. Will shuddered again. He was glad he had remembered to swallow his morning dose of

the repellent that helped keep them off his skin. It seemed strange—even dangerous—to have things like that flying around loose!

"Why did your family move here?" asked Arkady.

Will frowned. "Romance," he said grimly. "I don't want to talk about it."

Arkady nodded. Sometimes he didn't like to talk about the things that were bothering him, either.

Sean fell into step beside Philippa. This was the first chance he had found to speak to her without anyone else around since their fight two nights ago. "Still mad at me?" he asked, trying to sound casual.

Philippa shrugged, causing her silky white hair to ripple over her shoulders. "Not mad," she said. "Just confused. I don't understand you."

Sean smiled. "Maybe you're not supposed to," he said.

Philippa scowled. "Don't be so smug. Listen-about that speech. I was wrong to push you so hard. I suppose I didn't make things any easier for you. But I still don't see why it bothered you so much. You're a natural leader. You take charge and people follow."

"Oh really?" said Sean. "It didn't seem like you thought that way a half an hour ago."

Philippa had been the only one to object when Sean had announced that the group was going to plant the remaining Fault Finders. They hadn't

really had an argument; she was clearly outvoted. But the disagreement had made everyone uncomfortable.

She flipped her hair over one shoulder, dismissing the incident. "Someone has to keep you humble," she said playfully.

Sean felt his cheeks grow warm. "Listen, this taking-charge thing isn't something 1 mean to do. It just sort of happens. After I get something started, I keep expecting someone to say 'Who the hell do you think you are? Sit down and shut up!' Like you did back there. Except usually no one does. Sometimes I really wish they would. I didn't know what I was doing on that bus yesterday. I was terrified."

"Yeah, but you were wonderful," said Philippa.

He looked at her. The tone in her voice, the look in her eyes, convinced him she meant exactly what she was saying.

He glanced back at the trail. He felt the same confusion he had experienced when they argued about the speech. He could never figure out if what Philippa liked was Sean Matthews—or what everyone else thought of Sean Matthews.

"I wonder if those two think we can protect them," said Zach. He nodded toward the pair of theskies as he lifted a branch out of Clea's way.

"Protect them from what?" she asked. "They're almost as big as we are."

"I don't know. From earthquakes. I'm just surprised they've hung around so long. They're get-

ting to be like family. I think we ought to name them."

"Well, what are they? Boys, girls, or one of each?"

Zach shrugged."Hard to say. Theskies tend to keep their gender a secret. I vote we name the big one Spike."

Clea laughed. "Isn't that an awfully masculine name for an animal of uncertain gender?"

"Not really. I used to have a cat by that name. He wasn't all that masculine after his operation. I had to give Spike to one of my cousins when we left Earth.This is in his—its—honor."

"Okay, then I want to name the smaller one Matilda."

"Matilda?" exclaimed Zach, wrinkling his nose.

"Yes—Matilda. That was the name of my pet sandpig back on Galahad. 1 miss her."

""What's a sandpig?"

Clea got so wrapped up in her description of the native biology of Galahad that she and Zach almost missed a turn everyone else had taken, and only got on track again because Sean called to them when he noticed they were straying.

To Zach's surprise, the theskies protested when he and Clea turned away from the path they had been following.

"What's bothering them?" he asked, nodding at the agitated creatures.

"I don't have the slightest idea," said Clea. "I wouldn't know how to annoy a theskie if I tried."

"Spike! Matilda! Andpig!" cried the larger of the theskies.

Clea took Zach's arm. "That's weird," she said. "Are you sure they're not a sentient species?" The idea was thrilling and a little horrifying.

"The psychologists have tested these things six ways from Sirius," said Zach. "All they

do is imitate sounds. It's empty noise. They have an amazing talent for it—some of them can pick up whole phrases with no trouble—but they have no idea what the sounds mean. They're like walking recording devices, and not a bit brighter. Just because you can press a button on a machine, and it repeats what you've said, you don't think it's intelligent, do you?"

Clea looked at him dubiously.

"Well, do you?" he asked.

"No, but—oh, I don't know."

"Well look, it doesn't make that much difference anyway, does it? I mean, they're protected, like all native species of every colonized planet. So it's not like we're going to start wiping them out and then discover that they really are intelligent after it's too late to save the species. It won't be like what happened with the whales."

He closed his eyes and shook his head. "Damn," he said. "I wish this ringing in my ears would go away."

"You have it, too?" asked Clea.

"It comes and goes," he said, whacking his hand against the side of his head. "I wish it would just go."

"Me, too," she said. "It's been driving me crazy ever since last night."

Zach looked at her in surprise. "You know, I guess it did start last night," he said. "I'd been thinking it began after that last quake. I was afraid the noise had damaged my eardrums or something. But I think it did start last night, after—after we went to bed," he finished lamely.

Clea looked at him sharply. But before she could question him they were interrupted by the arrival of a very agitated Sean Matthews. "What's wrong with you two?" he snapped. "Are you lost in the Toroid Zone?"

"What do you mean?" asked Zach, his voice sharper than Clea had ever heard it. Then he looked around.

"Oh," he said sheepishly.

They had gotten so involved in their conversation they had continued walking even after Sean had warned them that they were going off in the wrong direction. Now the rest of the group was standing about ten meters away, looking at them like they were total idiots.

"Ackle, ackle!" said the theskies.

Zach hesitated. "Look," he said. "I know this sounds weird, but I think those theskies want to show us something. They've been acting really funny."

"Funny!" said Spike.

"Funny, funny!" said Matilda.

"We don't have time for theskie games," said

Sean. "We have to get these Fault Finders planted."

"Theskies!" said Spike, bobbing its head up and down.

"Come on," said Sean, "let's move."

Zach looked back at the theskies.

"Sean is right," said Clea, touching Zach on the shoulder. "We really have to get this done."

They followed Sean back to the main trail. The theskies came trotting along behind, clucking and muttering to themselves. Despite what he had said to Clea earlier, Zach couldn't help but think that they sounded very unhappy.

When the group finally reached the place where they were to plant the first of the three remaining Fault Finders, they discovered that doing the job with six people and a reduced equipment supply was an exercise in patience that would have riled the temper of a Vespen mudcow, a creature widely recognized as the most notoriously placid animal on the 115 settled planets. Biologists were still trying to discover how the species stayed alive, since mudcows had been known to starve to death rather than take the trouble to get up and go look for food.

By the time they actually drilled the hole, everyone was in such a hurry that Zach burned his hand by not waiting for the rim around the opening to cool before trying to lower the Fault Finder into position.

"Ow, ow, ow!" cried the theskies, imitating

him as he jumped around, blowing on his blistered palm.

"Only two more to go," said Sean grimly. He tried to radio a message back to the observatory, but the small set he had strapped to his wrist, meant only for intragroup communication, didn't have the power to punch back through the hills to the main receiver. He would have to find someplace higher to make the call. He wished he had asked Dr. Kovitch to toss her radio across the crevice, but realized that was silly. She would have needed it to give directions when the Veetol came to pick up the injured student.

Will groaned and dragged himself to his feet. He grunted as he picked up his pack.

Arkady considered offering to take some of the burden, but realized it would be hard for Will to accept in front of the others. He decided to wait until they were on the trail. He might have a chance to talk to Will alone, when shifting some of the load would be less embarrassing.

"Where did these paths come from, anyway?" Philippa asked as they set out again. "We

certainly haven't been out here making them."

"I think they're theskie trails," Arkady answered. "They usually travel in packs, so it makes sense that they would wear down a trail, especially if they follow a regular route. That's probably why those theskies of Zach's—what does he call them?—"

"Spike and Matilda," said Philippa.

"Right. That's probably why Spike and Matilda

were upset back there. I'm guessing they were torn between sticking with us and following their regular path. Or maybe we were taking a trail that belonged to a rival band of theskies. Who knows? We don't know that much about the creatures yet."

"A rival band?" asked Philippa nervously. "Are they territorial? I don't want to get caught between two bands of angry theskies, even if they are friendly to humans."

She shivered at the idea. Theskies were so friendly it was easy to lose sight of the fact that they were essentially two meters of bone, muscle, and sinew equipped with very sharp claws and teeth.

"Are there other animals out here?" she asked nervously.

Sean shrugged. "Nothing that seems dangerous to humans. At least," he added cheerfully, "not that we know of."

"Oh, boogie-boogie-boogie," said Philippa, trying to laugh off his attempt to frighten her.

But she found herself looking into the undergrowth with increased nervousness as they continued along the path.

CHAPTER TWELVE:

The Patch of Green

The theskies behaved rather placidly for the rest of the afternoon. Clea wondered if it was because they had forgotten what was bothering them, or because they had just given up on distracting the group from their work.

It was late afternoon by the time they reached the location designated on the maps for the third Fault Finder. They were traveling through a relatively open section of forest, quite different from some of the thick underbrush through which they had passed earlier in the day.

"Where do quufers live?" asked Clea when they stopped to let Will rest. "They're all over the city, but I haven't seen any since we left."

"No one is sure, really," said Sean. "They seem to prefer sunshine—the most likely place

to find them is somewhere warm, soaking up rays. So I guess you wouldn't expect to find them in the woods. Too shady."

"I'd like to be somewhere warm, soaking up rays," said Zach. "I'm beat." He looked at Will. "How are you doing?"

Will sighed. "As soon as we get home, I plan to get in a hot bath for about eighteen months. I'm lame in places I didn't even know I had." Then he turned the focus of the group away from himself by pointing to the map. "I think we have to go this way next. It's not very far."

Sean glanced at some of the photos that went with the map. "It looks like there's a big plateau about two kilometers past the final location," he said. "It's hard to tell how high it is, but if we can climb it, it might make a good spot for us to spend the night. If it's high enough, maybe we can radio the observatory."

Clea blinked. Although it made sense, she hadn't realized they would be spending the night in the wilderness. "Shouldn't we go back to where we separated from Dr. Kovitch?" she asked.

"Maybe tomorrow," said Sean."But we'd never make it back there before dark tonight. Anyway, I'm hoping that if the emergency work is done by tomorrow they might send a veetol out to pick us up."

"That would be heavenly," said Will.

Two hours later they were preparing to drill the last hole when a tremor knocked them all to the ground.

"You know you're getting blase when you start shrugging off earthquakes," said Philippa, climb-

ing to her feet and dusting off the back of her boorman.

"Blah, blah, blah," said Spike, who had run off squawking when the tremor hit.

"You know, I'm not sure I like those things," said Philippa. "They may not know what they're saying. But they definitely have a preference for rude noises."

"Gack!" said Matilda, nodding and blinking.

"My sentiments exactly," said Will. He picked up the gravmeter and continued his efforts to get a steady reading.

After the teenagers planted the last Fault Finder and began heading for the plateau, Spike and Matilda started to act up again. This time even Sean was willing to admit that they seemed to want something.

"I guess we might as well go see what has them so wound up," he said as he watched them run frantically back and forth from the group of exhausted hikers to a faint trail that angled off through the foliage.

Will sighed heavily, but didn't say anything. They began to follow the theskies down the trail.

"I don't get it," said Zach, when they came to an area where the foliage had been trampled down. "What's bothering them?"

The theskies were running around in circles, gabbling unhappily. Spike kept nudging Zach with his head, but he couldn't figure out where the animal wanted him to go.

"I think I know," said Clea. She was standing at

the edge of the clearing, looking down at a trampled plant. She sounded nervous.

"What is it?" asked Sean.

"Someone's been here before us," she said.

"That doesn't make any sense. The central computer banks have a record of every inch of Gauguin that's actually been explored. These photos and maps are all marked as virgin territory." Sean paused. It hit him for the first time that they were seeing territory that had never before been viewed by human eyes.

"Well unless theskies have started using boots, someone else has been tromping around here," said Clea.

"Yeah, and I think it may be kind of a dangerous someone," said Zach, pointing to the ground at the left of the area that had been trampled down. When the others crossed to join him they saw a dark green patch of something dry and flaking. Matilda and Spike started to shriek.

"What is it?" asked Philippa, stepping closer to Sean.

"Body fluid," said Zach, "something like blood."

"Green?" asked Will.

Zach nodded at the theskies. They were shrieking and clawing the ground.

"Let's get out of here," said Clea. She started to shiver, despite the fact that the late-afternoon air was very hot.

Clea had spent most of the day trying to ignore

what had happened just before she went to sleep the previous night. She preferred to believe it had been a dream, even a hallucination, than to think that someone—*something*—had really tried to contact her.

Someone must hear witness, the message had said.

Could it have come from the theskies? Was this what they were supposed to witness, that someone had been hunting them?

The idea was appalling, of course. Clea had been too deeply conditioned by the Planetary League's injunctions protecting all native **life-**forms not to respond with horror

to the idea of someone actually hunting the creatures, as Will claimed must be happening.

Yet somehow she couldn't believe that the message had come from the theskies. Zach was right. They were just another kind of parrot-funny to listen to, but not really intelligent. But then where had the message come from? Was someone else on Gauguin trying to contact them?

Or was she simply losing her mind?

"You're an empath, aren't you?"

The unexpected sound of Zach's voice made her jump.

"Sorry," he said. "I didn't mean to scare you."

"I'm just a little jumpy after what we found back there," she said. She took a deep breath and tried to calm herself.

"I know. Me, too." He looked her in the eye

and asked the question again. "Are you an empath?"

Clea hesitated. "I'm not sure," she said. "I seem to have some ability in that direction. My mother claims I've always known what people were feeling without being told. Why?"

"Arkady told me that you knew Sean and I were having trouble with Mr. Oblitt on the bridge yesterday before anyone could really see it. He said you nearly gave poor Dr. Kovitch a heart attack by announcing it when her back was turned."

"Someday I'll learn to keep my mouth shut," said Clea.

"Can't hide that kind of thing forever," said Zach. "My mother's an empath—one of the best healers around, though that's not saying much, considering the planet has a total population of seven thousand two hundred and three. And that's assuming no one's been swallowed by an earthquake since yesterday."

"What are you getting at?" asked Clea.

Zach hesitated. "Did anything weird happen to you last night?"

He saw the answer in her eyes before she nodded her head. The motion was slow, almost reluctant. He understood; he didn't want anyone to think he was crazy, either.

"Do you know what it was?" she asked.

He shook his head. "Haven't the foggiest idea," he said. "But I got sick of holding on to it by

myself. Do you think we ought to say anything to the others?"

"I don't know. Do you think any of them might have experienced it, too?"

Zach shrugged. "I've been watching them all day. But when I tried dangling a few hints, you were the only one who rose to the bait. No one else even gave me a nibble. So I'm guessing it was just the two of us."

"So what do we do?"

"Wait. Keep our mouths shut and see what happens. I don't know about you, but I'm scared."

"Don't say that!" she said. "Pretend you're not. Then I won't be so scared."

"Anything you want," said Zach.

"Are you convinced it was hunters?" Sean said, looking up into Will Mornette's troubled face.

"How certain can I be?" said Will with a shrug. "It's like the maps, the knots; I'm using things my I father taught me. I've never actually seen the results of a hunt. It could just be some native predator. But that clearing was filled with signs I was taught to look for."

"What kind of signs?" asked Arkady.

Will shrugged, looking embarrassed. "The way the plants were bent. A place where the leaves looked as if something heavy had fallen on them. A line where some broken stems indicated something might have been dragged across them. A handful of scales. It's all interpretation. You don't know for sure. But it's possible."

"But hunters?" asked Philippa. "No one would be hunting on Gauguin. People just don't do that kind of thing."

Sean laughed, but the sound was bitter and harsh. "You'd be amazed at the things 'people don't do' that get done," he said. "My father has talked about a few of them. Usually he doesn't say much because it upsets my mother. But there's a market in that kind of stuff. People, rich people, who collect—things."

"Stop," said Philippa. "I don't want to hear about it."

"So what do we do now?" asked Arkady.

"Find a place to make camp for the night," said Sean. "Hope we don't have any more earthquakes before they get us out of here. Try to do something about this when we get back to town."

"Can we do anything?" asked Will.

Sean looked grim. "Probably not. The official attitude is pretty much what Philippa said a minute ago: people just don't do that kind of thing. The unofficial attitude is people just don't want to know."

The base of the plateau was farther than Sean had anticipated.

"I can't," said Will with a groan when they emerged from the trees, and he saw the steep

rise of rock ahead of them. "I really don't think I can do it."

"Then we'll wait till morning," said Sean. "We can radio in then. We're probably as safe down

here as we would be up there, anyway. We'll just make sure we make camp far enough from the cliffs that if there is a quake, we won't be in line for any falling rocks."

"Sounds fine to me," said Arkady.

Sean wasn't surprised. He had already noticed that the sturdy Thetan was making a point of watching out for Will.

They pitched their tents and prepared supper in relative silence. But as they began to eat, Will let out a noise that was halfway between a moan and a sigh. "I can't believe it's over," he said in astonishment. "I really can't believe I don't have to walk anymore today!"

Justine came floating over the horizon. The sky began to fill with stars. Nameless creatures shrieked and growled and uttered other less distinct noises beyond the electronic barrier. Wings fluttered overhead.

Spike had his long neck stretched over Matilda's back. Suddenly his eyes popped open, and he lifted his head and cried, "I'm a rover, rover, rover, and I sail from star to star."

"Ackle," replied Matilda placidly.

"That's not just mimicking!" said Clea.

Sean shook his head. "Of course it is," he said softly. "You and Zach were singing those very words last night."

"Well that's a lot of syllables for a dumb animal to repeat after only hearing it once."

"Are you sure it only heard them once?" asked Arkady gently. "It seems to me as though I heard

you singing the song again today while we were walking."

"Well, maybe I did," said Clea a little uncertainly. "But that's still a lot of words."

"A lot of words and not a bit of comprehension," said Zach. "If they were really using words, they would talk to us. Spike was just repeating sounds."

"Oh, there's no talking to you guys," said Clea. "I'm going to bed. I'm tired."

But once she was in the tent, Clea found that she couldn't sleep. Too much had happened in the last few days. She began to make a list in her head of everything she had experienced recently—partly so she could feel sorry for herself, partly *so* she could be impressed with herself.

"In one week I've landed on a new planet, been trapped in earthquakes, hiked into the wilderness, and learned to operate a gravmeter," she whispered, almost like it was a

litany.

Then, reluctantly, she added, "I've also received a mysterious message by telepathy."

She wished Philippa would come into the tent.

But the arrival of the girl from Alphorion carried no comfort. When Philippa backed into the tent, spread her sleeping sheet, and then turned around, Clea cried out in shock, in the darkness the whites of Philippa's eyes gave off a soft green glow.

"Don't be so provincial!" snapped Philippa. "Everyone knows people from Alphorion have eyes that glow in the dark."

Clea started to deny that she knew any such thing. But then she remembered Sean talking about it at the school assembly. How long ago was that? she wondered, and was astonished to realize it had only been two days.

"I'm sorry," said Clea, feeling embarrassed. Anything other than mild curiosity in response to planetary-induced traits was considered the height of rudeness. She knew she had totally humiliated herself by her reaction to Philippa's eyes.

To her astonishment, Philippa brushed the matter off. "It's all right," she said. "It's been a long day. Let's get some sleep."

But sleep did not come. Clea was just drifting off when the message came tickling into her mind again. This time there was no denying it. *Someone must bear witness,* insisted the mind that was reaching out of the darkness to touch hers. *Please come to the plateau. Someone must hear witness.*

She sat up and began to dress.

Philippa sat up, too, her luminescent eyes the only point of light in the tent. "Did you hear it?" she asked, her voice trembling in wonder.

"I did," said Clea.

"What does it mean?" asked Philippa.

"I don't know," said Clea. "But I have to find out."

She opened the tent and stepped out into the night.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The Summons

Sean couldn't believe he was having this argument with Zach of all people. Zach was a skate. He was flip and funny. But he wasn't out of his mind. At least, he hadn't seemed that way. Now he was standing in front of the tent, claiming that he had to go up onto the plateau.

"This is ridiculous," said Sean. "You can't go now."

"I have to," said Zach. "There might not be a later. And there's something up there that someone has to see."

"He's right," said Clea. "It has to be now."

Sean hadn't even seen her come out of her tent. "Not you, too," he said wearily.

"What's going on?" asked Arkady, crawling out of the tent he was sharing with Will.

"Zach—and Clea, I guess—think there's something they have to see up on the plateau. I'm try-

ing to be as polite as I can about telling them they're crazy." He turned back to Clea. "We're going up there tomorrow anyway."

"Tomorrow will be too late," said Clea.

"What are you talking about?" asked Sean, sounding as puzzled as he was angry.

Clea hesitated. "I don't know for sure," she said. "It's something that comes inside my head when I'm just about to fall asleep. It happened last night. It happened tonight, even stronger. It's not words, it's—feelings, images, almost like a memory tugging at me. All I know is we have to go up to the plateau. We have to bear witness."

"Didn't you feel it at all?" asked Philippa.

Glancing sideways, Sean could see her glowing eyes at the opening of the tent.

"No," he said, almost defiantly. "Did you?"

"Only like a whisper," said Philippa. Her voice was soft, frightened. "It tickles at the back of my head. It's like an important dream that you can't quite remember. I didn't feel it as strongly as Clea and Zach. But it was there."

"And do you think we should climb the plateau tonight?" demanded Sean.

"I don't know," said Philippa. She stepped away from the tent, into the light of the twin moons. "I'm confused."

"There is something up there, you know," said Will, who had followed Arkady out of the tent. "I can feel it, too."

"What about you, Arkady?" asked Sean.

Arkady shook his head. "I don't have any idea what's going on."

Sean turned and looked at the plateau. The steep sides appeared silver-blue in the moonlight. Was something waiting for them up there? The idea made the hairs along the back of his neck rise.

"Did it ever occur to you that if there is something up there it might be dangerous? I'm not saying there is anything. But if there is, are you sure you want to climb up there and

find it in the middle of the night?"

"Tomorrow will be too late," said Zach uneasily-

"Why?"

"I don't know. I just know it will be."

"Sounds like pressure tactics to me," said Sean."Buy now or lose this deal. Even if hearing this 'message' doesn't mean you're crazy, trying to answer it right now does."

"You're wrong," said Clea. "It's not bad. I know it's not." Even as she made the protest she knew she sounded silly and naive.

"Want some candy, little girl?" said Sean sardonically.

"You're twisting my words," said Clea angrily.

"I'm trying to keep you from doing something stupid!" he snapped.

"Witness!" said Spike.

The six teenagers turned to look at the theskie.

"Witness," it repeated. "Witness! Ackle ackle ackle."

Philippa moved closer to Sean.

"Are you sure they don't know what they're saying?" asked Clea.

"I'm not sure of anything right now," said Zach.

"They pick up on emotionally charged words," said Sean, trying to stay calm. "Someone here said 'witness' just a minute ago. Spike's only repeating it."

"Go. See. On the plateau," agreed Matilda in her raucous, cawing voice.

Philippa slipped her hand into the crook of Sean's arm.

"Everything they're saying they heard right here in the last few minutes," insisted Sean.

Clea wasn't sure whether he was trying to convince himself or the rest of them. She looked at the plateau. What was waiting up there? Was it really a trap, as Sean was warning them? That was hard to believe. The message had seemed friendly. Desperate, yes. But not the sending of an enemy.

Want some candy, little girl? She frowned and shook her head, trying to drown out Sean's words.

She didn't need to. The message came again and did the job for her. *Someone must hear witness.* It was intense, almost desperate.

"I have to go up there!" she said.

"No!" said Sean. "You're staying here with the rest of us."

She looked at him coldly ."Are you telling me I'm a prisoner?" she asked.

Sean looked uncomfortable. *Now what do I do?* he thought. He had no right to force Clea—or any of them—to stay in the camp. No one had elected him leader; they all just acted like he was in charge. *Typical,* he thought bitterly. *Everyone was glad to have me run things as long as we didn't disagree. That way anything that went wrong could be my fault. But as soon as they want to do something different, its every entity for itself.*

"The barrier is still up," he said ambiguously.

"Are you telling me I'm a prisoner?" repeated Clea, insisting on an answer.

Sean closed his eyes. If he held Clea here against her will, she could bring charges against him when they got back to Ambora. But if he let her go and anything happened to her—

"Zach?" he said, looking for support.

"We've got to go, Sean."

Suddenly he wondered if he would be able to stop them even if he wanted to.

"Arkady?"

Arkady Davidov looked up at the mysterious plateau. He tended to think Sean was right-going up there now was a bad idea. In fact, he wasn't even sure he wanted to go up there in the daylight. On the other hand, his family believed—deeply—in not interfering with what others chose to do.

But, he thought, arguing with himself, is *this*

really a matter of choice? Zach and Clea seem to feel compelled. So maybe something is already interfering with their right to choose.

"I believe we should stay here," he said.

"This isn't a vote!" said Clea. "I don't care if you come or not. I'm going to the top of that plateau!"

Arkady sighed. He knew he hadn't really answered Sean. The important question had been unstated: *Will you help if I try to force them to stay?*

He felt as though he was standing on a razor-thin line, with a bottomless abyss yawning on either side of him.

"People make their own choices," he said at last. He wondered as he listened to himself whether he was speaking from moral conviction or from cowardice.

Sean sighed. In a way, the decision had been taken out of his hands. Will and Philippa were already leaning toward Clea's point of view. Without Arkady to help, there was no way he could prevent them from going.

Was he glad or not?

Certainly Arkady's decision not to back him up avoided what would undoubtedly have

been an extraordinarily unpleasant scene. But whether it simply delayed the unpleasantness, or even traded it for something even worse, he couldn't say.

"Sean," said Clea, "take down the barrier."

"The controls are in my pack. If you want it

down, you can take it down yourself."

Zach crawled into the tent and emerged a moment later with a small, silvery-looking box. "I've got it," he said. His voice sounded uneasy. He glanced up at the plateau. Sean thought he saw his friend shudder.

"Zach," he said, "you don't have to go."

"Witness!"' gabbled the theskies."Witness."

Zach closed his eyes. "Yes," he said slowly. "I do."

Both moons were up. After sixteen years on Earth, Zach still found the double shadows confusing. He looked at the box in his hands. No need to remove the entire barrier—just create a small opening. He pressed a series of buttons, and the red lights on two of the slender poles that he and Sean had placed in a circle around the camp blinked out. It was down; they could go out. And, he realized with a shiver, whatever was out there could come in.

He turned to Sean and tried one more time. "Look, we're not being drawn along like zombies. This is our choice. We don't *have* to go. We *want* to."

"How do you know that's not part of the whole illusion?" asked Sean wearily. "That you're being given a choice instead of being forced."

"We don't," Clea answered.

Zach felt sick inside as he followed her through the gate.

"I think we should go, too," said Philippa, before they were out of sight.

It was the first time in several minutes that she had spoken. She had watched Sean struggle with the others, torn within herself over whether she wanted him to win or lose the argument. But now, watching Zach and Clea start toward the plateau, she felt she had to go along. Whatever was there, it was calling her as well.

"Of course we'll go," said Sean angrily. He had disappeared inside his tent. Now he reappeared, wearing a full boorman and adjusting the straps on his pack. "Arkady get your stuff. If you couldn't back me up on this, you can at least help me cover those fools."

"I had intended to," said Arkady calmly.

Sean hesitated, hovering at the edge of an apology. But his sense of betrayal was still too raw, and it died on his lips.

"I'm coming, too," said Will.

Sean nodded. He didn't figure Will would be much use. But it was probably a bad idea to leave him here alone. If anything happened to Will, he'd probably catch hell for that, too.

By the time the four of them were ready, Zach and Clea were about a hundred meters away from the camp.

Next question, thought Sean. *Do we try to catch up with them or stay behind so we avoid whatever mess they might be walking into?* He rubbed his hands over his face, as if that would somehow give him an answer.

"Come on," said Philippa. "I want to walk with them."

Sean looked ahead. The sight of Zach and Clea walking across the clear, flat space that led to the plateau, flanked by a pair of bouncing theskies was almost comical. If he hadn't been so frightened, he would have laughed.

"I'm sorry if you feel I let you down," said Arkady, falling into step beside him. "For you, things are always clear. You know just what to do. It is not always that way for the rest of us. I had to choose what made sense for me. Maybe it was wrong. I don't know."

Sean looked at Arkady in astonishment. Did he really mean what he had just said? Did the others really think he was free from insecurity, from indecision? He shook his head wearily. "We'll talk about it later," he said. "Right now we'd better concentrate on keeping up with the rest of them."

Arkady nodded. Will and Philippa weren't exactly running. But they were moving fast enough that they would catch up with Zach and Clea long before they made it to the base of the plateau.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN:

Into the Plateau

"Do we have any idea what we're doing?" said Clea shortly after they had passed beyond the electronic barrier.

"I don't know," said Zach. "Do we?"

"Gack!" said Spike emphatically.

"Quiet, you," said Clea. "I'm in no mood for theskie humor."

"When we found that spot this afternoon, the place where—" Zach hesitated, suddenly uncertain just what it was safe to say in front of the theskies. "Uh—the place where these two got so upset," he finally said, "I thought maybe we had seen whatever it was we were supposed to see. You know, that we had become 'witnesses.' But I guess that

wasn't it."

Clea shook her head. "I thought that for a little while too," she said. "But once it started to get dark, I began to sense there was more to it than

that. I think what we saw earlier today is a separate matter."

Zach nodded. "And a serious one if someone is actually poaching theskies. But what do you suppose *this* is all about?" he said.

She sighed. "I wish I knew. Are you frightened?"

"Terrified."

"Me, too. But I don't feel like I'm 'possessed' or anything stupid like that. I'm doing this on my own."

"I know," said Zach. "But I can't help remembering those old stories about the sirens of the spaceways luring men to their doom."

"Does that mean I'm safe because I'm a woman?" asked Clea, trying to lighten the mood.

"Women are never safe as far as I'm concerned," said Zach.

"Do you mean women are never safe around you, or you never feel safe around a woman?"

"Figure it out," said Zach with a grin.

It was his last attempt at humor. As they continued toward the plateau, he grew increasingly sober, awed by the sheer cliffs that loomed ahead of them, and even more by the return of the message, intense and urgent.

Please come. Someone must know. Someone must bear witness.

The sensation was tantalizing, frustrating, exhilarating. Zach knew he wasn't understanding the message fully—partly because it came more in pictures and feelings than in words, partly

because the pictures were hazy, like fleeting remnants of a dream, or the reverse images that sometimes lingered on the inside of his eyelids after he had stared at something too long.

He was concentrating so intensely on the message that the arrival of Will and Philippa nearly sent him out of his skin. "Don't do that!" he cried when Will tapped him on the shoulder.

Zach shook his head when he saw Will recoil in shock. "Sorry," he said. "I didn't mean to scare you. But you *terrified* me!"

"I just wanted to let you know we were here," said Will.

"Is it my imagination, or is the message getting stronger?" asked Philippa. Her skin was so pale that she looked almost ghostly in the moonlight.

"It's stronger," said Clea. "Or at least, more *intense.* I'm still trying to experience it more *dearly."*

Philippa nodded. "We're doing the right thing," she said, though whether she was trying to encourage the others or convince herself was hard to say.

"Do you know where we're going?' asked Will. "I mean, do you know what we're going to do when we get to the plateau?"

"No," said Zach.

"Yes," said Clea.

He looked at her in surprise. "You're right," he said a moment later.

She smiled. The message *was* getting clearer.

"Can you see it?" she asked.

He nodded. Across what had been bare ground there now stretched a broad, straight road that led directly to the plateau. Looking at it, Zach understood that it was not really there, at least not now. But he knew, too, that it had been, once before. As he stared at it, the road began to glow, not so much a road but a strip of light leading to— what?

"I can't see anything," said Philippa. "What are you two smiling about?"

"It will come to you soon," said Clea. "I'm positive."

"We've got 'em," said Sean. "Those cliffs are too steep to climb in the dark. Unless they're totally out of their minds, they'll stop right there."

"You sound relieved," said Arkady.

"Aren't you?" asked Sean.

"I don't know," said Arkady. "I was becoming very curious. I wanted to know what this was all about."

"You would have made a good theskie," said Sean, unable to stop himself. "They have more curiosity than common sense, too."

Arkady stopped. "I think you spoke too soon, my friend," he whispered, his voice filled with awe.

Sean had been facing Arkady. He turned to see what the other boy was talking about and cried out in surprise.

The others had reached the base of the cliffs. But instead of being forced to stop, as he had

expected, they were going on. Sean tried to swallow the lump that seemed to lodge itself in his throat as he watched Clea approach the spot of light that had appeared on the cliffside in front of her.

The light shimmered and grew. Suddenly it flashed, then disappeared. Where it had been was an opening in the cliff, twice as high as Will Mornette, twice again as wide as that.

"Clea!" cried Sean. "Wait—"

It was too late. She had entered the opening.

Sean grabbed Arkady by the arm. "Come on— let's move!"

They began to spring toward the opening. But they were too late. As Will Mornette entered the opening, it closed behind him.

"Damn!" cried Sean.

But he kept running.

Clea watched the opening appear in the cliff with a mixture of feelings that ranged from joy to awe to terror.

Just what are we supposed to witness! she thought as the face of the rock disappeared to reveal the enormous opening beyond. The moonlight spilled in but a little way. Beyond that everything was dark.

"Should we go in?" she heard Zach ask. She didn't bother to answer. She knew they would enter. She had to. She also knew that, as terrified as she was, if she turned away from this adventure while it was still safe, while the world still

nearly made sense, she would never sleep in peace again as long as she lived. The question would always be there, nagging at the back of her mind: *what was on the other side of that opening?*

She stepped through. The others followed. Without a sound the opening closed, plunging them into total darkness.

For a moment everything was confused. She heard Zach gasp in surprise. The theskies began to gabble frantically. Philippa, who had been walking behind her, reached out and grabbed her shoulder. Clea turned. The glowing green of the other girl's eyes was the only point of light in a world that had become totally black.

"Just a minute," muttered Will, "just a minute, just a minute. Ah, there we are."

Clea heard a click. She blinked as a bright light appeared in Will's hand.

"You two were in such a hurry you took off empty handed," he said, nodding to Clea and Zach. "I figured we might need more than just hands and feet to get to the top of the plateau, so I grabbed my pack. I think Philippa has hers, too."

"I do," said Philippa with a little laugh. "I was so wound up in what was going on, I forgot I was wearing it."

She slipped off her pack and rummaged around until she found her own hand torch. Flicking it on, she began pointing it around her. They stood in a vast chamber. Clea

estimated its

height at ten meters, and its width at twenty. Its length was unguessable.

"What is this place?" whispered Philippa.

"I don't know," said Clea softly. "Zach?"

"Not the foggiest," he said, running a hand through his brown hair. "But I can tell you this much: it ain't natural, and it wasn't made by theskies."

"What do we do now?" asked Will.

"Move on," said Clea. "This is interesting, but it's not what we were called to see."

Sean stopped in surprise. At their approach the same light he had seen before flashed on the face of the cliff and the huge opening appeared before them. He had been sure that they would be shut out, that the cliff would only open for those who had heard the "message."

He hesitated. He had been so concerned about getting into the cliff he hadn't really thought about what he would do if it turned out to be possible.

"Shall we go in?" asked Arkady quietly.

"We have to," said Sean.

"Do you ever do anything because you want to? Or is everything duty with you?"

"Save the therapy session for later," snapped Sean as he stepped forward and flicked on his hand torch. He flinched as the gate closed behind them. But he saw another light ahead of him. "There they are," he said. "Come on."

"Why not ask them to wait?" said Arkady. "We're all in this together now."

Sean shook his head. "I'll be very happy if this turns out to be all sweetness and buttercups," he said. "But someone needs to stay on the alert around here. If you want to join them, go ahead."

It was Arkady's turn to shake his head. "I will keep watch with you," he said.

They picked their way across a smooth, flat floor that was covered by a thick layer of dust. The dust was marked with the footprints of a variety of animals, including a great number of theskies. Animal droppings were everywhere.

"Look," said Arkady. He rubbed his foot over the floor, scraping away the dust. The surface underneath was highly polished.

Sean knelt and ran his finger over the black, glasslike surface. "Who made this?" he asked in wonder.

Philippa cried out in fear and surprise when the lights blazed on around them. The illumination seemed to come from the wall, the floor, the ceiling. Everywhere. She covered her eyes with her hands. After a moment, as she parted her fingers and her eyes

began to adjust, she realized the light was not as painfully bright as she had thought.

"This is getting weirder by the minute," whispered Zach.

Philippa nodded in silent agreement.

The section of the passage that was lit

extended about five meters in front of them. Their hand torches had shown them enough so that nothing they saw now was that surprising, although the theskie skeleton to their left caused her to flinch in distaste. To her surprise, neither Spike nor Matilda seemed disturbed by the skeleton.

"Death by natural causes," said Zach when Philippa mentioned this fact. "I think what disturbed them earlier was not that theskies were dying, but *how* they were dying."

"I agree," said Clea. She walked to the right and ran her fingers along the wall. "Smooth," she said. "And warm."

"Smooth and warm," gabbled Spike.

Philippa started to speak but stopped and pressed her fingers against her forehead. "The call is getting stronger," she whispered.

"I know," said Clea.

They walked on. When Will, who was walking slightly behind the others, passed the last of the lights, the area behind them went dark again.

Philippa swung her light over the area in front of them. "I wonder what happened here," she whispered.

It was clear something had gone terribly wrong. The great corridor was shattered and broken. Chunks of jagged stone, some as large as a hoverbus, lay scattered before them. The floor, so smooth since they had entered, was now like the surface of the ocean on a rough day; from left

wall to right it was buckled and warped for as far as they could see ahead of them.

"Come on," said Zach. "We don't have much time."

That was true; the messages said so.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN:

Midnight on Bald Mountain

"I wonder if the earthquakes did this," said Arkady as he picked his way over the shattered, debris-filled floor.

"Well, it wasn't any of the recent ones," said Sean. "Look at the dust on these chunks of

rock that fell out of the ceiling. It's about the same thickness as the dust on the floor. And from the layers of footprints we've seen, that dust has been here for a while."

"Then how long ago do you think this happened?"

Sean shrugged. "It's almost impossible to tell. Except for when the doors open, this place is sealed. So there wouldn't be anything to cause wear and tear; no rain or wind or anything like that. It seems like the door opens for anyone or anything who approaches —"

"Which indicates that whoever built it was very trusting," said Arkady.

"Not necessarily," said Sean, unwilling to let go of his suspicions, "It could just as easily indicate that whoever built it was very powerful—or simply that the operating mechanism somehow got locked on 'Open for Anyone Who Approaches.'"

"I would prefer to believe the best," replied Arkady, "but what you say is true."

"You sound like I always look for the worst," said Sean.

Arkady shrugged his broad shoulders. "Being cynical is an unpleasant job. I appreciate the fact that you're willing to do it."

Sean hesitated, uncertain how to respond to that statement. "Anyway," he said after a moment, "as for how long this has been here, the best indicator would seem to be the thickness of the dust. I've been trying to figure out where it comes from. I can't think of any way for great amounts of it to come in. My guess is that it either filters down from somewhere ahead of us, or it comes in with the animals when one of them wanders through the door. Neither way would cause it to accumulate very fast. In fact, I think the buildup would be extremely slow."

Arkady ran his foot across the floor, digging a line through the dust. "If that's so, then this passage must be very ancient."

"I think that's likely," said Sean.

"So, *compadre,* what is issuing this 'call' that the others say they hear?"

"I don't know. But I don't like it." "Let's not let them get too far ahead," said Arkady. "They may need us."

"Now what?" said Will. He played his light over a debris-strewn stretch of floor that extended ahead of them for about five meters, then ended at a smooth, blank wall that stretched straight up for as far as they could see.

"Now what, now what?" cried the theskies, their voices echoing hollowly around the baffled teenagers.

Will sagged down onto a large chunk of rock. He had been so involved in their strange discoveries that he had forgotten how tired he was. Now that they had stopped, it seemed to strike him all at once. Matilda came and laid her head across his knees. He

stroked her neck, enjoying the feel of her scales beneath his fingers.

If only it wasn't so warm in this place.

He watched through half-closed eyes as Clea turned from side to side. "There has to be a way," she muttered. "I know there's a way."

"There is," said Will lazily.

"What?"

"It's over there," he said, pointing across the rubble to a dark spot on the side wall.

"How do you know?" demanded Clea.

Will sat up in surprise. "I saw it," he said. "Like the other messages. I just closed my eyes, and it was there."

"Why *you?"* asked Clea. She sounded close to

tears. "Why didn't the rest of us get the message?"

Will winced. He could tell that what she really meant was "Why didn't I get the message?"

"Maybe because he was relaxed," said Zach, putting his hand gently on her shoulder. "After all, the rest of us are pretty keyed up. Remember, the first messages came as we were drifting off to sleep. Maybe it's easier to contact us then."

"That makes sense," said Clea.

Will noticed that her hands were trembling.

"Let's go look where Will pointed," said Philippa.

Will got to his feet, groaning slightly as he did. Clea came to stand beside him. "I didn't mean to snap at you," she said. "1 was feeling—well, jealous, I guess. I didn't want someone else getting a message that I couldn't sense."

Will nodded and followed her to the corner, where they found was a wide crevice that cut up through the rock at a sharp angle.

"Ackle!" said Spike, running up the crevice until he was out of sight, and then back down to tug on the sleeve of Zach's boorman. "Ackle!"

"I'm coming," said Zach. "Just give me a minute, will you?" He turned to the others. "Do you think we should tie ourselves together?"

Will hesitated. As far as he was concerned, it was a good idea. But he didn't want to appear any more weak and helpless than he already did. So he was relieved when he heard Philippa agree with Zach's suggestion.

Well, that was stupid, he thought, as he began tying loops into the rope he dug out of his pack. *I can't believe I was willing to start climbing up this crevice without a rope, rather*

than let the others think I was weak or scared enough to need it.

He shook his head. He was both weak *and* scared, and he knew it. So why was it so important to hide the fact? He could imagine his plaque in the Hall of the Dead: *Will Mornette—2504-2520. He died with a good image.*

"Ready?" called Zach.

One by one, the others answered.

They started up the crevice.

For a few terrible seconds, Sean thought he had lost them.

Then he heard the familiar gabbling of a theskie come echoing down from the wall off to his right. Nodding to Arkady, he began clambering across the debris that filled the cul de sac. "They went up there," he said, shining his hand torch into the crevice.

"Are you sure?" asked Arkady. "That could be a wild theskie."

"Well, where else could they have gone?"

In answer, Arkady played his light around the rubble-filled chamber. It was easy to imagine a passage hidden behind every stone and every pile of debris.

"I'm a rover, rover, rover," sang the raucous voice of a theskie.

Arkady smiled. "You win," he said. "They're up there!"

They started to climb.

"I think this was a stairway," said Sean after a moment. "If you look, every once in a while you'll see a corner under all this rubble—like here."

He pointed his light to the right, then pushed away some small stones with his foot. Two straight, clean surfaces met at a right angle. But neither of them was larger than the palm of Sean's hand.

"If this was a stairway, something sure tore the hell out of it," said Arkady.

Sean nodded. "The way I figure it," he said, "that blank wall where the main corridor stopped was probably some kind of lift or transport system; like an old-fashioned elevator, maybe. Then there was this stairway along the side for emergencies, or for people who wanted to walk, or whatever."

Arkady paused. "Do you realize what you're saying?"

Sean closed his eyes. "Yeah, I know what I'm saying. We finally found one. A hundred years of galactic exploration, space alone knows how many planets—and we finally found another intelligent species. Only from the looks of things, it was gone long before we got here."

Suddenly Arkady clamped his hand down on Sean's arm. His grip was so powerful that Sean cried out in pain. "Sorry," said Arkady. He

sounded distracted, as if he barely noticed what had happened.

"What is it?" asked Sean nervously. "Arkady, what's wrong?"

The muscular boy blinked and shook his head. "I felt it," he whispered. "The summons —the message that Clea and the others have been talking about."

Sean looked at him in alarm.

Arkady shook his head again. "I'm all right," he said. "Just a little surprised."

"What does it feel like?"

"Like—like a dream, I guess. I don't mean dreamy and sweet. Just that it's kind of hazy, hard to get a hold on. I have images at the back of my head. I know they're there. But if I try to look at them, they disappear.'"

Sean shook his head. "I still don't feel a thing," he said. "I don't know if I should be relieved or jealous."

"I think we're almost at the top," said Clea. "Look—you can see some light up there."

"Ah, the light at the end of the tunnel," said Zach. "Something I've always wanted to experience."

"Shhh!" hissed Clea. But she reached her hand back, indicating that she wanted Zach to come and climb beside her. Crouching forward, they made their way up the scree. It soon became obvious that Clea was right; they were nearly at

the end of the crevice. Moonlight was pouring in through an opening ahead of them.

Zach glanced at Clea. Her large eyes were filled with excitement. The moonlight seemed to caress her cheeks, to catch and tremble in her hair. For the first time he realized how truly beautiful she was.

Another few meters, and they had reached the surface. They climbed through the opening and looked around them.

Clea's first reaction was disappointment. Both moons were shining full on the plateau, and in their silvery-blue light she could see for a good distance. But all she saw was a broad, flat surface strewn with rocks. To the right, about a half-kilometer away, was the edge of the plateau. Beyond, she could see the foothills of the Catalans, covered with thick forest. Straight ahead, the plateau rolled on for a great distance, farther than she could estimate. At the end reared the great line of the Cynthians, a rocky barrier that stretched north and south as far as she could see. In the light of the twin moons the distant, snow-capped peaks looked strange, fascinating, alluring.

She turned her attention to her left. Less than two meters away the plateau came to an abrupt halt at Bald Mountain, which seemed to soar up from the edge of the plateau as if trying to scrape the stars from the sky.

The scene was very beautiful. But it was empty.

She walked forward, shaking her head. She didn't know what she had expected to find. All her efforts, all her thoughts, had been focused on getting to the top of the plateau. And now that she was here—nothing.

She felt bereft—as if she'd lost something that made all the difference. Her self-pity was interrupted by two things:

The first was the return of the message. *Please come. Someone must see. Someone must bear witness.*

The second was the feel of Zach Yamoto's hand grabbing her elbow.

"What are you—"

"Shhh!" he hissed, interrupting her question. "Don't move. Don't talk."

But it was too late. The thing had seen them. As she watched in horror it rose to its feet and began lumbering in their direction.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN:

A Walk Along the Edge of the World

Clea stared in terror at the enormous lizard bearing down on her. *Even if it's friendly, I'm dead,* she thought, as she watched a forked tongue at least a meter and a half long flick in and out of the creature's mouth. *All it has to do is lick me, and it's all over.*

Suddenly she realized Zach was trying to drag her back toward the crevice.

"No," she cried. "It might follow us, get the others." Shaking free of his grasp, she darted to the right.

"You're going to get yourself killed!" yelled Zach, running after her.

The lizard turned its massive head to follow their movement. It shook its tail and started after them.

"Up here!" shouted Zach. Sprinting past Clea, he began climbing a large rock that jutted up

from the surface of the plateau. He reached down to help her up. She scrambled up beside him, onto a little ledge somewhat higher than her head. A few moments later they were on top of the rock—about four meters above the ground.

"What if it can climb?" asked Clea nervously.

"We get to count its teeth," replied Zach.

The creature was taking its time now, apparently confident its intended dinner wasn't going anywhere.

"It's the same kind of thing we saw next to that pond, back when we were on the hoverbuses," said Zach.

"Only 1 think it's bigger," said Clea.

Zach studied the animal for a moment. "You're right," he said. "Nose to tail, this guy is at least twelve meters long."

Clea stepped back from the edge of the rock. Now that the immediate danger was over, she was able to examine the approaching lizard more closely. Despite its great length, its short legs kept it close to the ground. In the silver-blue moonlight its scaly skin looked dark purple. A crest ran along its back from the center of its head to a place slightly above its hips. The crest appeared to be composed of some leathery material stretched between about twenty long spines. The crest sagged and lifted as the animal walked, so that sometimes the spines stood nearly vertical, and at other moments they lay almost flat against its back.

Clea was mystified by the scraping sound she

heard, until she realized it came from the creature's tail. Long and heavy, it swung from side to side as the beast walked, cleaving a series of arcs through the pebbles and dirt behind it.

"Should we go down the back of the rock?" she asked.

Zach shook his head. "It's a straight drop," he said, "and once we're down, there's really no place to go. I don't want to try to outrun him until we find out whether or not he can reach us up here."

At the sound of Zach's shout, Sean started to run. Pushing his way past Will and Philippa, he burst onto the moonlight-drenched plateau. It took him only a moment to locate Zach and Clea. They stood atop an enormous rock, clinging to one another. Crawling toward the foot of the rock was an enormous, lizardlike creature.

The flat surface of the plateau stretched on only a short distance past the dreadful scene, then abruptly dropped off. The light from the two moons made everything stand out in sharp relief so that his friends seemed to be outlined against a sheer black wall filled with stars.

He slipped his pack from his shoulders and was fumbling through it when something shot past him crying, "Ackle! Ackle, ackle, ackle!" He looked up and saw Spike running straight toward the monster.

The great head turned. For a moment it looked like the creature was going to snap at the theskie,

which suddenly seemed tiny in comparison.

"Ackle!" cried Spike. "Ackle, ackle!"

Zach looked down from the rock. "Spike is trying to distract the thing!" he said in amazement.

The giant lizard watched the theskie for a moment. Then it turned back toward the rock and opened its mouth.

Clea felt a strange fascination. She knew that if she fell forward she would simply disappear into that great maw, which could engulf her with a single bite. Two great orange eyes, each as large as her head, stared up at her. They seemed to glitter in the moonlight.

She shivered, suddenly wondering if this was the thing that had called them to the plateau. Could this monstrosity have reached out, touched her mind, drawn her to it?

"No!" she said out loud, startling Zach. The message must have come from some other place.

But the lizard's eyes were so compelling.

Clea took a step toward the edge of the cliff. Zach grabbed her arm and drew her back. "What are you doing?" he cried.

She shook her head. "I don't know. I—I thought—" Her eyes widened with horror at what she had almost just done. "Hold on to me, Zach! Don't let me near the edge. Don't look into its eyes."

He wrapped his arms around her, drew her close.

The great creature roared in displeasure. It was the only noise, other than the sweep of its

tail, they had heard it make. It seemed like it might shake the stars from the sky. Clea clung to Zach, shivering in terror, too frightened to notice that he was shaking, too.

A scraping sound drew their attention to an enormous foot, toes tipped with claws like carving knives, that appeared at the edge of the rock, then slipped back down.

They backed up a step. Zach glanced over his shoulder. Another step and they would go over the edge.

The claw appeared again, and behind it the enormous snout of their pursuer. The great tongue flicked over the rocks, coming within centimeters of their feet.

Suddenly the creature's head snapped back. Its mouth opened in a silent cry. The nictating membranes began to flicker over the bulging orange eyes.

With a slight gurgling sound, the beast slid backward, out of sight.

After several seconds of silence, Zach relaxed his grip on Clea. Taking her hand, he stepped forward. When he realized he was half expecting the lizard to come roaring up over the edge of the stone, like a monster in some horror holovid, he dropped her hand. "Stay here," he whispered.

"How many centuries will it take you guys to start treating us like equals?" she said, her voice shaking. She grabbed his arm. Together, they took a tentative step forward.

"You can come down now," said a familiar voice.

When Zach looked over the edge of the rock and saw Sean Matthews standing on top of the still body of the lizard, dangling a trank gun casually from his left hand, he didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

Clea did both.

If I act too smug they'll kill me, thought Sean, trying desperately not to smirk as he watched Zach and Clea climb down the face of the rock.

But he felt smug. He felt powerful and competent. The others had gone off without thinking. They had panicked. He had kept his wits, and his equipment, together; had been ready to act when he was needed. He was glowing inside. *Keep it to yourself, Matthews,* he thought.

"That was well done," said Arkady, walking up from behind.

"Thanks," said Sean. He forced himself to remember that if circumstances were different, their positions could have been reversed. Arkady was every bit as brave as he was. But Arkady had stumbled in the tunnel and then had had trouble getting his gun to function. There had been no time to wait, so Sean had taken action.

He remembered the way the other boy had pulled him back from the edge of death in the chasm two days ago, and the quiet way in which he had accepted their thanks. *How did Arkady*

feel then? Sean wondered. *Were his insideson fire like this?*

Zach and Clea had made a point of climbing around the fallen lizard. Now they were standing beside its slate-colored belly, looking up at Sean.

"Come on down, hero," said Zach. "Let's get out of here before this thing wakes up."

Sean slid down over the smooth, saucer-sized scales and landed on his feet in front of them. "Zach's right," he said gruffly. "We can't be sure how long this thing will stay out."

As if in response, one of the great legs twitched—a motion that would have knocked one of them over if they had been standing too close to it.

How stupid can a guy get? thought Sean, his cheeks burning. *Some triumph this would have been, if one of us got a broken back while I was standing up there showing off.*

"Was that what brought us up here?" he asked, gesturing over his shoulder as they began walking back toward the crevice.

Clea shook her head. "The call is still coming," she said, stopping for a moment as a quufer scuttled in front of her. "In fact, it's stronger than ever."

Sean sighed. Though he was still worried that they might be walking into a trap, it seemed impossible to hang behind now that the others knew he and Arkady had been following them.

Following the call that he still could not hear, they started across the plateau together. As they

walked, he found himself wondering why it was so much harder to go against the desires of the group than it was to face a monster lizard.

"Quufer city," said Zach, reaching down to pick up one of the creatures which had begun to cluster around them in increasing numbers.

Sean had to agree. In all the time he had been on Gauguin he had never seen such a concentration of the friendly little animals.

"It makes sense," said Will. "If what they like most is basking in the sunshine, this plateau is a perfect place for them. It's so flat and open they must love it."

"We make quite a procession," said Zach. "Six kids, two theskies, and a herd of quufers walking along the edge of a plateau. I wonder what we look like from down there."

Even as he spoke, more quufers attached themselves to the group.

"Look," said Arkady a moment later. "Isn't it wonderful?"

"What?" said Philippa.

Arkady turned toward the edge of the plateau and swept his arm out in a gesture that seemed to take in the entire planet. "This!" he said. "All of it! Look how beautiful it is."

He's right, thought Clea. *I've been so intent on following this message that I haven't really been seeing what's around me. This is something that must be witnessed, too. This is worth knowing.*

As she stood at the edge of the plateau, looking

out across the rolling hills, the forests, the lakes, and rivers, she suddenly felt a pang of protective-ness for this rough, wild planet to which she had been dragged against her will.

I have never seen a sky so black, she thought, *never seen stars so bright.*

Her heart seemed to swell with an urge to know the planet, to be part of it. The moment was interrupted by a cry from Sean. She turned and saw that he had fallen to his knees and was clutching his head between his hands.

"All right," he moaned, "We'll come. We'll be your witnesses."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN:

The Witnesses

They moved in silence now, almost as one organism. The call was strong in all of them, seemed to grow more powerful with every step as they drew inexorably closer to its source.

The theskies were darting back and forth in front of Clea, gabbling in excitement. The number of quufers beside and behind the group continued to increase.

Juliette disappeared behind a cloud, leaving only the swollen crescent of Justine to shine on the plateau.

And then the earth opened beneath them.

It was not another earthquake. They had simply stepped onto an area that was too weak to support them. The jolt was minor—they fell only a few feet before they landed on a smooth slope. Unable to find anything to grab onto, they slid, screaming and shouting, back into the plateau.

They came to rest in—a room. It was round and small, no more than three meters across. With two theskies, six teenagers and an innumerable host of quufers, it was far too crowded for comfort.

In the wall there was a hole.

In the hole there was a box.

And in the box there was a city.

But they didn't know any of this when they first landed in a shouting, struggling tangle of arms, legs, and theskie necks.

Sean was the first to his feet. Convinced that the long-dreaded trap had been sprung, he looked around, ready for danger. He couldn't find any. It was just a room, round and small and crowded.

"Where are we?" asked Clea plaintively.

"I don't know," he said, feeling impatient. Coming here had been her idea. Why was she asking him?

And then he felt it, an enormous sensation of relief, as if something long feared had been averted. It came from outside, from the same source as the summons. After a moment, he realized that it was another message. His mind grappled with the feelings, the fleeting images, and finally converted them into four words: *Thank you for coming.*

"You're welcome," he said aloud, though he had no idea to whom he was speaking.

They were all on their feet now. Clea was the first to see the hole in the wall. Gently

pushing

aside a quufer, she moved to stand in front of it.

"This is it," she said. "This is why we were called." She reached into the opening in the wall, a space no larger than two of their packs placed side by side, and drew out a box made of gray metal.

"What is it?" asked Zach.

"I'm not certain," she said. "Let's take it back to the surface."

Everyone seemed to know what to do now, what was expected of them. Shooing Spike and Matilda ahead of them, they made their way back up the slope. The angle was steep, and climbing it was not easy. After a while Sean and Arkady went ahead, then threw back a rope to help the others.

The quufers scrambled up the incline with no difficulty.

Juliette had come back out from behind the clouds.

Moving as if in a dream—and yet somehow, thought Sean, completely in control, completely awake—they walked toward the center of the plateau. They stopped when they came to a flat space, several meters across, that was nearly a perfect circle. In the center stood a large, round rock, also flat.

Clea placed the box on the stone. The others gathered around and watched as she opened it.

Inside the box was a half-sphere made of the same gray metal. The surface of the half-sphere was marked by a ring of indentations. The inden-

tations were multi-sided, as if various large crystals had been pressed into the metal when it was soft.

Clea's fingers did not tremble as she lifted the half-sphere out of the box and placed it on the stone. Under the place where it had rested she found a small door. Opening it revealed a second compartment, which contained a cream-colored bag made of soft, supple material. Clea opened the bag. Inside were seven large crystals, each a different color.

She poured them into her hand.

Solemnly, each of her friends reached forward to take a stone. Silently, one by one, each of them inserted a stone into the half-sphere.

When they were done the final, blood-red stone remained. Closing her eyes, Clea placed it gently, almost reverently, into the remaining indentation, at the top of the half sphere.

And it began.

Clea heard a tinkling of music, as of a thousand silver bells above her head. She looked

up. The sound seemed to shimmer around her, cascading in silvery ripples.

She put out her hand, as if to grasp the music, then cried out in wonder as a city began to tremble into view. One by one its towers rose before her, multiplying until they filled the plateau.

She glanced at the others. Did they see it, too? They must. Like her, they were stumbling to

their feet, turning this way and that, reaching out as if to touch a dream.

"Is it really there?" whispered Philippa.

Zach shook his head. "I don't know," he said. "I don't know what it is. A projection—a hallucination. Who knows?"

"Perhaps we have gone back into the past," said Arkady quietly.

At first, the flat space where they stood, the circle to which they had brought the box of crystals, seemed unchanged. No buildings had risen from the ground here, no streets cut across its surface.

Then Sean realized that the tiles—when had the tiles appeared beneath his feet?—were engraved with designs. He knelt and traced them with his fingertip. The lines seemed to burn their way into his memory, and he realized they formed a map of some kind.

Suddenly he looked up. More messages were coming, flooding in faster than he could receive them. His head began to swirl with images, too many to sort out. A flood of words, unknown, alien, was washing through him. He closed his eyes and tried to hold very still, afraid that if he tried to move he would fall over.

Slowly, the world came back into focus. Sean could not understand the words pouring into his skull. They belonged to another time, an alien race. But the images—the feelings—told a story anyone could understand. They were as human,

as real, as the five friends who stood with him in the center of the ancient city. He decided to go explore.

Will stood in front of a building, running his hands over the crystal and silver wall.

"It feels solid," he said.

Arkady nodded. "This is like a holovid," he said. "Only bigger than any I have ever seen." He opened the door of the building. They stepped through it together.

A store, thought Will in surprise. *Well, why not? Surely they had stores here.*

He looked around. Unless he was mistaken, it was a bakery. And then all at once he could smell it. The odors were like home. They were rich, sweet, basic. Suddenly he was struck with such a sense of loss that he slid to the floor and began to weep. "It was all real," he whispered when Arkady knelt beside him. "It was real, so real you could smell it. And now it's gone."

"I know," said Arkady, squeezing his friend's shoulder. "I know."

Philippa was never able to say for sure when it was that the people appeared. When she noticed them, it seemed like they had always been there. At first she was frightened. She huddled in a corner, staring at the creatures. They were strange, even hideous, by human standards, with thick orange skin and flat faces and «yes that seemed at least twice as big as they should be.

And yet—and yet they weren't ugly at all, she decided.

It was the message throbbing in her brain that made her feel that way.

See this, and remember. Please, remember.

Suddenly she was seized with an overwhelming love for these strange figures. She reached forward timidly to stroke the arm of the woman closest to her. It was warm, supple, softer than she'd expected.

But the woman didn't know she was there.

Zach sat in a corner, sobbing. It was a memory. Everything around them, all that they were seeing, hearing, feeling—a memory recorded by the last to go, recorded so that it would not be lost forever.

But it was a memory filled with such love. *These were my people. This was my home. Do not let it be forgotten.*

The message came to him not in words—the being who had made this record had no words that Zach could understand—but in feelings that were clear as crystal.

It was that sharing of feelings that let him see the people who laughed and talked in the room before him not as strange, orange-skinned aliens, but as friends and neighbors. Brothers and sisters. Family. He was achingly aware that they had had dreams just like his own. They wanted to do things. They wanted to be happy. They wanted to be loved.

They wanted not to die in the war that was coming.

A child, at least someone much shorter than most of the people around him—her?—went strolling by. It had a quufer on its shoulder, a theskie bouncing at its heels.

"Pets!" thought Sean in astonishment. "Quufers and theskies were family pets! No wonder they're so friendly."

He shook his head. That didn't make sense. Animals wouldn't stay domesticated that long, would they?

How long ago had all this happened?

He pressed his hands against his face. He couldn't think clearly. The thoughts, the memories seemed to be pounding against his brain. He wondered what it was like for Zach and Clea. They had received the first messages so clearly. Was all this even stronger, more clear, for them?

He turned and headed back for the center of the city. Maybe he would find out when he met them back there.

Clea knew, somehow, that what was coming next would be awful. She waited, trembling, for the others to return. She didn't want to experience it alone.

Zach was the first to arrive. His skin looked ashy in the moonlight. His eyes were red from weeping. He sat down next to her, cross-legged on the tiles, and waited. Neither of them spoke.

Arkady and Will came next. Like Zach, they approached in silence, took their positions without speaking. Sean and Philippa completed the circle in the same way. All of them sat cross-legged, so close that their knees were touching.

Each of them had to look past the others to see the city, to see what happened, next. Zach reached out and took Clea's hand. The gesture passed around the circle until they were linked, and as ready as they could be.

Zach shuddered. Though the words flooding through him were incomprehensible, the images and feelings told the story on their own.

Yet as the experience unfolded, he found himself trying to translate it into words. It took him a moment to realize why. Then he understood. That was his job. He was a *witness*.

He closed his eyes and watched the city he had just experienced as so vibrant and alive slide into a trough of despair as it became clear that the war was coming.

He shook with shared terror as the tanks rolled into the streets and the mindwhips began to spread their poison. He wept, softly, silently, as men, women, and children—not orange-skinned strangers, but his friends, his family—ran gibbering into the streets while madness clawed at their minds.

And then he was allowed to enter the madness himself. Afterward he blanked most of that out, because it was simply too horrible to remember.

Last of all, he saw the making of The Record,

as one boy, the last in the city, crawled through the streets, using the mind stones to save and record all that he could remember of the glorious place he had once called home.

Zach ached for the boy, ached *with* him, for the power of The Record was such that he felt as though he was inside the boy's skin, felt as though he, too, was the last one left, and knew that he was dying.

His very arms ached as he finished the record of what had been, and placed it in a box, in a room, deep beneath the remains of the city.

And his heart broke as he fell across the box, hoping that someday someone would come and bear witness to the betrayal of the dream.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN:

Planet of Secrets

The quufers were shrieking.

The sound roused Sean. He shook his head and became aware of the others sitting nearby. He squeezed his eyes shut. He needed time to absorb what he had just seen, to sort through the wonder and the sorrow.

But they had no time; the messages were telling him that they had to leave the plateau immediately.

Spike and Matilda were running frantically back and forth behind him, crying, "Get out! Get out! Get out!"

Arkady blinked. "I think they mean it," he said. He shook Will, trying to rouse the tall, slender boy into action. But Will looked blank, still lost in the vision.

Arkady tried again. "I said, I think the theskies are serious."

"Serious!" cried Spike.

Suddenly Clea cried out as a wave of panic hit her—seemed to hit all of them simultaneously.

Zach's eyes flew open. "Quake coming," he said, and Sean knew he was right, though he could not have said how he knew.

Yet even with the clear knowledge of danger, it was hard to refocus their thoughts. Sean was the first to shake free of the vision. Climbing to his feet, he began to pull at the others. "Come on," he said, "come on, we have to move." When they grumbled and resisted, he began to shout, demanding that they get up and head for the crevice that led off the plateau.

They stumbled into motion. The quufers swarmed ahead of them. Spike and Matilda ran alongside, gabbling frantically.

As they ran Clea found she was still haunted by the vision that had overtaken her; more than once she caught herself nearly tripping over phantom images, images of things that had disappeared—how long ago? She didn't even realize they had reached the crevice that had led them to the plateau, until the sound of Sean and Zach arguing brought her, finally, to full alertness.

"Come on!" said Sean urgently. "Let's move!"

"I'm not sure we should go in there," said Zach, gesturing at the opening. "What if we're inside when the quake hits?"

"I don't get it," said Philippa warily. "Zach's right; there's a quake coming. But why do

we

know that?" She pressed her fingertips against her brow. "What's going on here?" she asked softly.

"Let's get off the plateau now and try to figure that out later," said Sean. He pointed at the crevice. "Look—the theskies and the quufers are going in. I think it's probably safe."

"And if it's not?" asked Arkady.

Sean shrugged. "What will our chances be up here in a quake?"

Zach glanced across the plateau, to the great rock where he and Clea had fled from the giant lizard. The creature's body was gone. "We may have another problem," he said. "It looks like our girl friend woke up. Course, if she's still up here when the quake hits, it probably won't make one bit of difference that Sean used a trank gun instead of a real weapon. I never could figure—"

"Zach," said Sean, "shut up!" He was done arguing. Taking Clea by the hand, he led the way into the tunnel. The others followed. They started out running but soon were slipping and sliding along the scree. They reached the bottom in less than a quarter of the time it had taken for them to climb it.

And still the message was pounding in their heads: *Get out! Get out*\

They stumbled frantically over the debris of the great passage, crying out when the lights blared on in the same spot they had before.

"What do we do if the door won't open?" asked Will, as the lights blinked out behind them.

"It has to," panted Sean, not wanting to admit that the same worry had been twisting his own stomach into knots.

But his smile betrayed his relief when they reached the end of the tunnel and—with another flash of light—the great door opened for them.

They raced through the opening and collapsed on the ground outside. There they lay, panting and gasping, until Sean forced them to get up and move on, insisting that they wouldn't be safe so close to the cliffs. When Will collapsed again, not more than fifteen paces away from the plateau, Sean and Arkady picked him up and carried him.

They had barely gone another thirty meters when the quake hit. The rumble of the earth seemed to come up through their feet as the grinding sound of the shifting tectonic plates began to fill the world.

Clea cried out in despair. Sean tried to turn to her, but the moving earth knocked him down. She fell beside him, still staring back in the direction from which they had come. He followed her gaze and watched in awe as the entire plateau began to tremble. Suddenly a huge chunk of rock separated from the edge of the cliff and crashed to the

ground, landing in the very spot he had forced them to vacate just moments before.

"The city," cried Clea, as more stones fell, and still more. "We're going to lose the city!"

Sean could barely hear her above the roar of the shaking earth as the plateau began to crumple in on itself.

For a moment the world was nothing but noise and shaking. Sean thought his eardrums were going to burst. His teeth felt like they were being shaken loose from their sockets.

And then it was over. The quake had lasted less than thirty seconds. But it was long enough to wipe out all that remained of the ancient civilization.

The six teens knelt together where they had fallen, staring up at the rubble of the plateau.

"Damn," said Sean finally. "It's going to be hard to dig that place up now."

"Is that all it means to you?" snapped Clea. "Don't you—" She stopped as she realized the flip remark was Sean's way of covering a feeling of intense, painful loss.

She shivered. Her understanding was not a guess, but a certainty. *Now how do I know that!* she wondered uneasily.

Suddenly she felt a wrenching in her head, as if the world was turning over. She blinked and cried out in shock. She was still sitting next to Sean. But she was seeing the scene through someone else's eyes—actually seeing herself next to him. *Is that really me?* she thought, as she stared at a slender girl who was far lovelier than she had ever suspected, especially now, with the light of two moons caught in her hair.

She watched herself press the heels of her hands against her eyes. The vision vanished. She looked up in time to catch Zach staring at her with a very strange expression on his face.

Will's voice distracted her. "You know, we've got some big problems coming up," he said.

"What do you mean?" asked Arkady. His voice was cool, controlled.

Clea blinked and tried to focus on the conversation.

"Well, we were called to bear witness," said Will. "I think that means we're supposed to tell people what we've just seen. But what do you think is going to happen when we try doing that?"

Zach groaned. "It's going to be a nightmare," he said. "After the quake, we don't have a shred of evidence. When we start talking about mysterious calls, strange visions, and ancient alien cities, 'crazy' is the *kindest* thing they're going to call us."

Clea noticed that Philippa had her arms crossed over her stomach, as if she was trying to protect herself from something. "I don't want to tell anyone," she said dully. "It will only cause trouble."

"Did anyone manage to bring along one of those crystals?" asked Will hopefully.

Sean shook his head. "They were still in the projection device. And with that quake warning coming right on top of the vision, we were just too foggy to think of it."

"Well, we've got to talk about it anyway," said Clea. "That's why we were brought here!"

"Now there's an interesting question," Zach said slowly. "Just who did bring us here?"

"You saw the boy," said Clea. "The boy who made the recording—" Her voice tapered off.

"Exactly," said Sean. "He made the recording. But he sure wasn't around to tell us to come see it!"

Will snorted. "Is it so hard to believe that someone with the level of technology it took to make that recording could have left a mechanism that would broadcast a continuous call, until some sentients finally arrived to be witnesses?"

"Sure, I can buy that," said Sean. "But I'm not sure I buy the idea that such a device could figure out when an earthquake was coming, and warn us to get off the plateau!"

Clea swallowed. What Sean said was true. But then where had the messages come from, if not from the boy who had left the recording? *Who had warned them of the quake?*

Her thoughts were interrupted by a whirring noise off to the right.

"A veetol!" cried Will, pointing toward a clump of lights moving toward them through the darkened sky. "How did it know we were here?"

"I radioed in while we were still up on the plateau," said Sean, "before I actually heard the call. You were all so wrapped up in what you were experiencing you never noticed. But I figured someone better do it."

"Ah," said Zach, "the boy wonder strikes again."

The remark angered Sean. But as he turned to

respond, he realized that Zach had said it with admiration and fondness.

Now how do I know that? he wondered. A sudden chill rippled down his spine as he realized, with a certainty he could not explain, that he should not have been able to understand Zach's statement that clearly.

Before he could worry about the feeling, the veetol touched down, and he heard the familiar voice of Katya Kovitch call: "Thank goodness you're here! Come on—get in before the aftershock hits."

They ran for the big double doors, Spike and Matilda at their heels.

"Not them!" said the pilot, pointing at the theskies.

"We have to—"gasped Clea.

"No time!" snapped Dr. Kovitch, "Get in!"

"Witness!" cried Spike, as the door of the veetol was closing. "Witness!"

Beneath them, the ground began to shake as the aftershock hit.

Clea watched through the window as the theskies, limned in moonlight, disappeared into the underbrush.

Later, Sean realized that he could have headed off what happened next. But he was too tired— and too exhilarated—to think clearly right then. It started innocently enough. They were slumped in the back of the aircraft, leaning against each other, bound by exhaustion, the

sharing of danger, and most of all, the incredible vision that had overwhelmed them on the plateau.

Looking them over, Dr. Kovitch said, "You six look as if you've really been through the wringer. I'm sorry I let you take off on your own like that."

"Oh, don't be," said Clea. "It was the best thing that ever happened to me."

Dr. Kovitch looked startled. "There's no need for sarcasm," she said.

"I'm not being sarcastic," said Clea, her voice trembling a little. "I mean it."

Dr. Kovitch rubbed her index finger alongside her big nose. "What do you mean?" she asked.

Sean could sense Philippa tightening in apprehension as Clea began to tell Dr. Kovitch what had happened. But she had barely gotten past their fear that someone was actually hunting theskies when it became clear that the scientist's reaction was not what she had hoped for.

"Clea," said Dr. Kovitch firmly, "Your exhaustion is letting your imagination run wild. You were in untouched territory. No one has been out there hunting theskies."

That's it, thought Sean. *If Kovitch can't swallow that, there's no way she's going to believe the bit about the city.*

Clea must have realized the same thing, because she suddenly looked small and frightened. Sean was startled to realize he could feel her frustration as if it were his own. The others shifted uneasily, as if they were sensing it, too.

Puzzled, Sean looked around the veetol and realized he felt close to these friends in a way he had never before experienced, not even with his parents. It wasn't just that they had shared an incredible adventure. It was something else, something he couldn't define, something that was only now starting to take form in the back of his head.

They flew in silence, until the pilot announced that they were nearing Ambora.

Sean looked out at the sky. Juliette was nearly straight overhead, a half circle of

shimmering light. The smaller moon, Justine, was an open crescent. Stars were spattered around them.

"Zach told me the air on Earth is so dirty you can barely see half this many stars," Sean said quietly.

"Who cares about Earth?" said Clea. "People keep telling me it's our home. Earth isn't my home. Even Galahad isn't my home anymore. Home is where you make it. It's anyplace where you can be together with the people you care about. Gauguin is my home now."

Sean listened to her without moving, *Could this planet be home?* he wondered. He had never dared to look at the possibility before. But suddenly he realized that even if his parents only stayed for another two years, he would be old enough to decide whether he wanted to move on or not. *Home,* he thought, looking through the window of the veetol, trying the idea on for size.

The aircraft was so quiet he could hear the faint boom of the glowing waves in Sanjoy Bay as

they circled over the city. Above the bay, the Tati River, sparkling in the light of the twin moons, flowed down between the five great domes of Ambora, which seemed to glisten softly in the moonlight. The glowglobes were on low, but the streets that were finished shone softly with their underlighting.

This place was more beautiful than any planet he had ever seen. But it had secrets, more secrets than any place humans had yet stumbled onto.

Sean shook his head. *What are you doing to us, Gauguin?* he thought, turning to look back toward the mountains that stretched into the distance.

But if Gauguin had an answer to his question, it was keeping it to itself.

He sensed the others around him then, and turned away from the window. *Home,* he thought again as he looked at them, his gaze drifting from Zach to Arkady to Will, then on to Philippa and Clea. *Home: where you can be with the people you care about.*

He sighed and leaned back against the wall of the veetol.

Home.

It would take him a while to get used to the idea. But suddenly, for the first time in years, it seemed like it would be worth trying.